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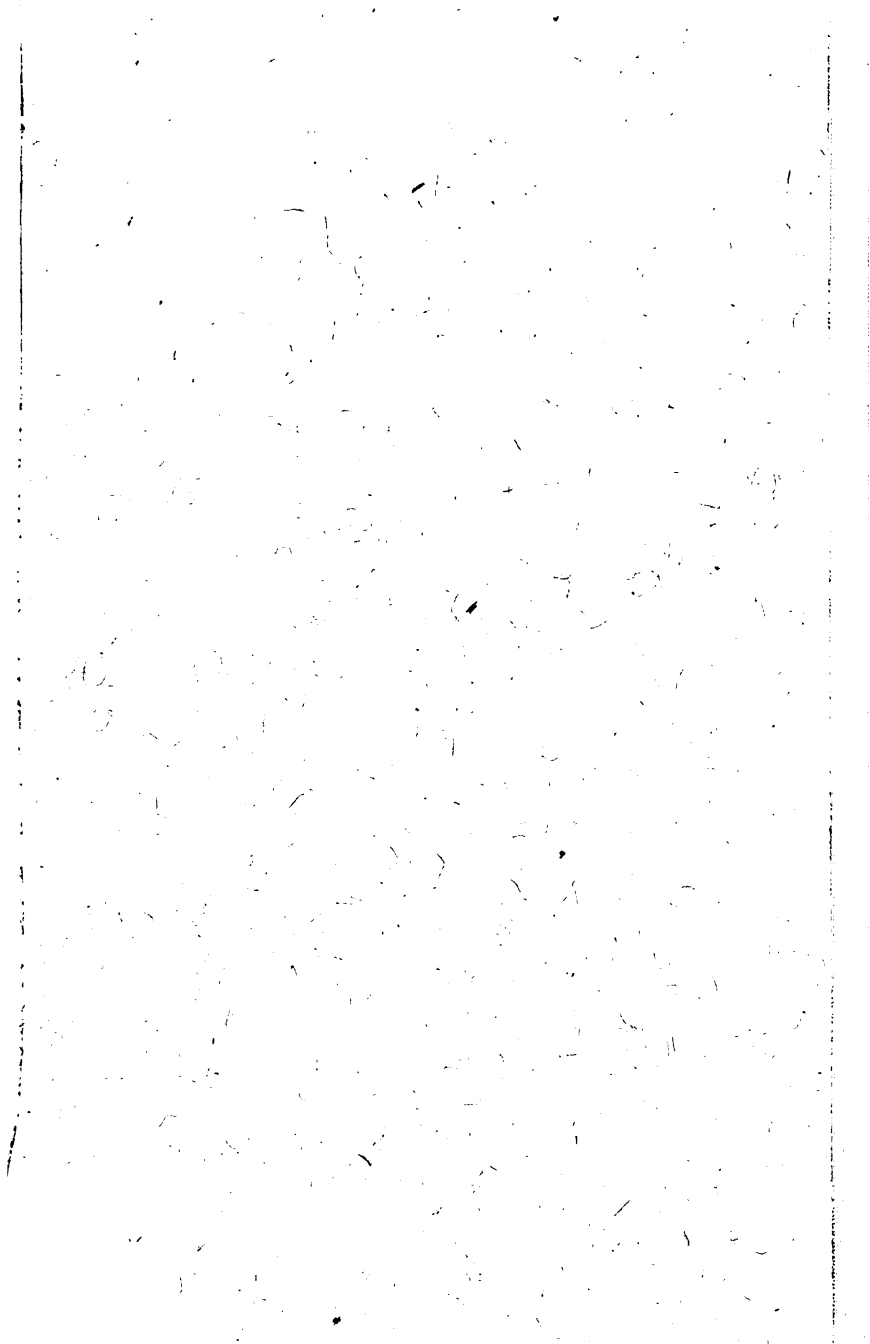
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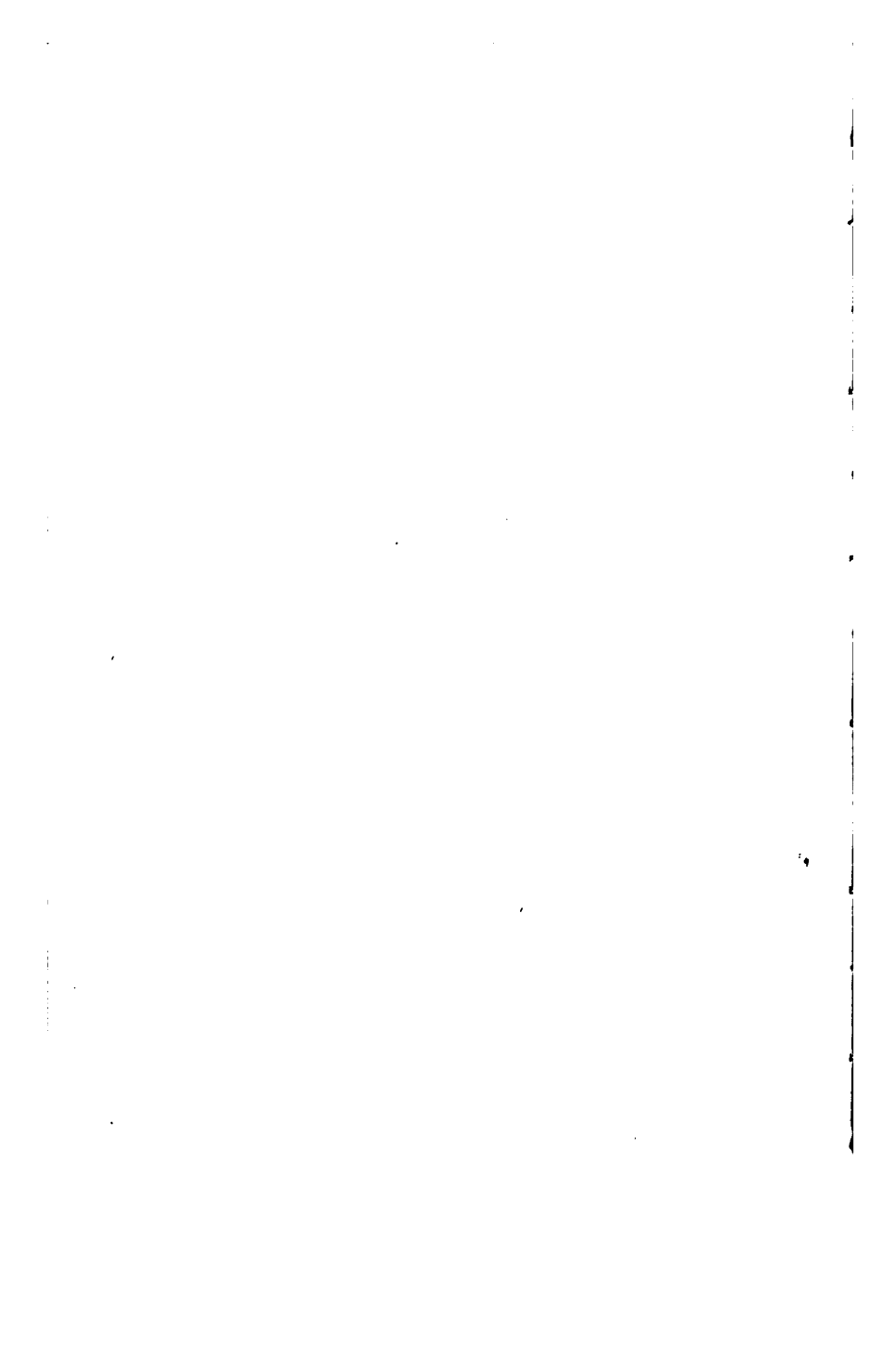
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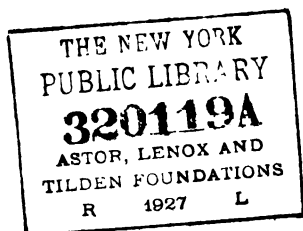
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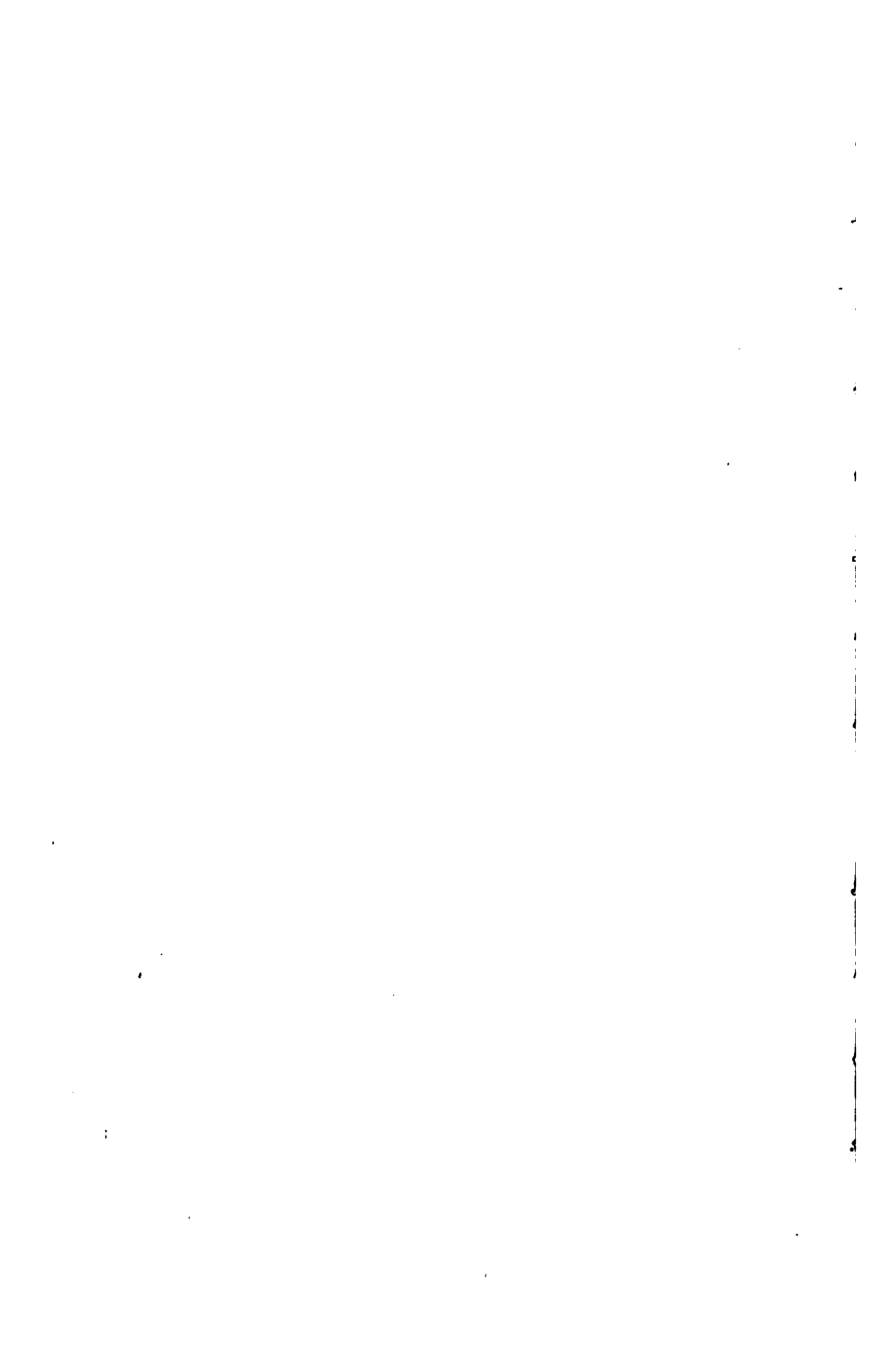
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CONSTANCE WEST



NEW YORK

Constance West

CHAPTER I

ON that great band of iron wherewith men have bound together ocean to ocean across a continent, one of the smaller stations is called Big Horn. The next to it is known as Big End, and in consequence strangers sometimes blunder between the two.

On this day a solitary passenger—a middle-aged lady of brisk appearance and active movements—alighted from the westward bound train at Big Horn and presently, upon inquiry, was dismayed to find that she was not at Big End and that there was no other train until the next day.

"You can likely drive, ma'am, if you want," observed one of the bystanders, for quite a little group of people had gathered on seeing her dilemma, to consider her case and to offer her advice. "I reckon some of the Big End folk will likely as not be in town."

"I saw Jim Cross a while back," said a second man, and at once two or three of them started off to see if he or another could be found.

"I am sorry to give so much trouble," said the stranger apologetically, "but I am very anxious to get to my destination."

Indeed, she seemed to show a kind of nervous im-

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patience, as though each moment's delay were torture, that increased the already sufficient curiosity of the bystanders concerning her. One or two ventured to hint questions as to the cause of her journey and as to her business at Big End, but she put by such remarks with a decided air.

"How far is it?" she remarked presently.

She was assured that the distance was not great, that while the trails remained as good as they were that day it could easily be driven within three hours. Satisfied on this point she sat down to rest and await the return of her self-constituted messengers, and while she rested the station loungers watched her and discussed her appearance and her probable business with much interest.

She was evidently only recently arrived from England; every detail of her dress and of her manner testified to that. In appearance she was a small, slight woman, delicate, indeed almost fragile. Her face was pale with hollow cheeks, the nose long and thin, and the lips closely pressed together. From the corner of the left eye ran a red sharply defined scar and from that eye she was not able to see, though no one would have guessed so much from its appearance. The other eye was remarkably bright and restless as though it knew it had double work to do. Her whole manner was precise and formal, and all her movements were so brisk and decided that it almost seemed as though her face, weary and deeply lined, must be older than her body with its quick, easy actions. Though evidently grateful for the interest taken in her predicament, she showed no disposition to be drawn into conversation. The only information the bystanders gained was her name—Mrs. Constance West—from the

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address on a small hand bag she had with her. This discovery they immediately signalized by so addressing her.

In the midst of their speculation, each advancing a different theory, a man arrived hurriedly, scenting a chance to earn a dollar or two, and announcing himself as "Jim Cross." He was rather rough looking, Mrs. West thought, but he seemed known to every one and he declared that he had a "dandy cutter" and could undertake to bring her to Big End in time for supper "dead easy." Mrs. West did not know what a "dandy cutter" might be, but every one seemed to think the opportunity a good one.

"You see," said the ticket-clerk, "there ain't no train here till to-morrow except the eastward."

"The eastward?" she repeated after him and suddenly she seemed to hesitate. "The eastward?" she repeated; "then one could return?"

They all looked at her in surprise, for it seemed from her manner as though she did indeed contemplate immediately returning.

"Do you mean that, ma'am?" asked one, voicing the general doubt.

"I—think so," she said, and then quickly interrupting the general murmur of astonishment: "No, no; let us be gone."

She began to make arrangements with Cross and suddenly displayed again a feverish anxiety to be away.

Cross, himself, was anxious to be off, for though the day had so far been very fine, clouds were gathering in the north. His horses were already harnessed; in a very few moments everything was satisfactorily settled, and she, sitting beside Cross in the sleigh he had called a

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"dandy cutter," was being rapidly driven towards the little settlement of Big End.

At Big Horn depot, the loungers gathered round the stove in the office and discussed her minutely.

"It was mighty queer," said the ticket clerk, "her talking about the eastward train and returning. She said she didn't mean it, I know, but I guess she did all right when she spoke—she looked so scary like."

But this opinion was crushed beneath unfavourable and derisive comment and so the conversation wandered on, the men discussing every detail with the appetite of those to whom few things happen.

Meanwhile Mrs. West was speeding rapidly on her journey. It was still early in the year and the frost that had held the land with intense grip for five months showed as yet no sign of relaxing. Everywhere, as far as the eye could see, was the same unending dazzling whiteness of the snow. It was as though nothing else existed or could exist but this, wide and white and level. Except here and there at long intervals where a scant poplar bluff would rear itself, stiff and tall, or a few willow bushes would peep through their powdery covering, there was no change or break in the chill monotony of the scene. But Mrs. West had quite thrown off the momentary depression that had seemed to seize her at the railroad depot. She now found a charm in everything, and everything alike seemed to her pleasant and even delightful.

The sun was shining brightly still, and his rays sparkled on the frozen snow till it glittered like diamonds. Not a breath of wind was stirring so that, though the temperature was considerably below zero, the cold did not feel extreme. The horses sped swiftly on the hard well-

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worn trail and the fresh keen prairie air came to Mrs. West, oppressed by days of stuffy travelling, like the finest of tonics. Her spirits rose momentarily, a new joy thrilled in her veins, and she became glad as she thought how near she was to the end of her long journey. She enjoyed everything, from the swift, smooth motion of the sleigh to the sight of the surrounding endless snow that in another mood might have seemed of an unbearable monotony.

Every now and then they would pass some settler's farm, and to all Cross gave a name, introducing her, as it were, with a flourish of his whip. These farms were of all sizes; some just tiny shacks with a sod-roofed stable near by; and some quite large groups of buildings, fenced in, and surrounded by groups of young trees. At all alike Mrs. West gazed with intense interest, picturing herself in her fancy the mistress of each one.

At first Cross had seemed inclined to be rather talkative, but he gradually grew silent. The sun that had shone so brightly, withdrew itself behind some clouds and a darkness spread with wonderful rapidity in the north. Cross watched it uneasily and was half inclined to seek shelter at the next farm house they saw. There were puffs of wind, too, now, that made Mrs. West shiver a little and that drove before it tiny clouds of the dry powdery snow. In spite of the increasing cold and Cross's silence, Mrs. West was too much occupied in watching this new country to notice anything amiss.

"There's goin' to be a squall," he said once.

"Oh, how interesting," cried Mrs. West, whose mood was still to find pleasure in everything.

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"Interesting?" growled Cross. "Maybe, only I wish I wasn't drivin' colts that have never been on the trail before. And I ain't fixed for a storm, neither."

Even the uneasiness that Cross showed did not affect Mrs. West's spirits. She did not connect the idea of a storm with any danger or even serious discomfort. Then suddenly, as it seemed to her with absolutely no warning, the storm burst. With a rush the wind leaped upon them, a shower of frozen snow borne upon its wings, and Cross pulled round the horses that could not face the biting, icy hail.

"I'll make for Simpson's," he shouted in her ear; "over that ridge. Say, but that come quick."

She did not quite catch the words for she, too, was bending low before the storm, the sudden rush of the blizzard that few can face and live. The changed direction of the cutter brought now the wind to their backs so that they could sit upright more easily, and Cross shouted again that he would make for Simpson's beyond the ridge.

"It's too sudden to last long," screamed Cross in her ear, "don't get scared."

Mrs. West smiled, for though the cold was bitter and the driving snow stung like innumerable tiny blows, she saw no reason for fear and was in fact rather enjoying the experience. She had winced and felt a little afraid, indeed, when first the storm had thrown itself upon them with such malign intensity; driving before it the snow in great clouds till all the air was so thick with the flying, frozen particles that not one yard could they see before them. But now that the sleigh had been turned so that it beat less effectually at their backs she had laughed at

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herself and muttered that she would feel quite an old resident with such an experience to talk of.

This reflection seemed to please her very much and she was repeating to herself "Quite an old resident," when suddenly the sleigh gave a lurch and tilted to one side, the horses, that had been just visible, disappeared in a cloud of snow and next moment she herself shot through the air and fell softly and quite unhurt into a drift near. The sleigh stood up on one end, and Cross, dimly seen through the flying snow, appeared inextricably mixed up with his floundering team.

Suddenly he stood beside her and helped her to regain her feet.

"Are you hurt?" he demanded.

"Not in the least," she answered. "What happened?"

"I had to let 'em pick their own way 'cause I couldn't see," he explained hurriedly, "and they landed right in a ravine full of snow. Say, you walk right on over the ridge and you'll strike Simpson's. Hustle and tell 'em I want help the worst kind of way. I daren't leave the colts."

"But I don't know the way," said Mrs. West, hesitating a little.

"You can't miss it," urged Cross. "Not if you tried. Straight on and not a hundred yards. There's the pasture fence you must strike just ahead and you only want to follow that. Hustle, and tell 'em to hustle or I'll lose my team, maybe."

His evident anxiety impressed her, and a hundred yards did not seem far. And floatingly it appeared to her desirable that she should begin her sojourn in this new country by showing herself strong and capable.

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"Very well," she said and started off.

"Keep the storm at your back," he shouted after her, "and you just can't miss it."

Then he went back to his horses, struggling in the drift into which they had fallen.

CHAPTER II

THE wind howled about her, the flying frozen snow beat all around, the fury of the storm became greater, seeming to attack her with malign intention; and Mrs. West began to grow confused. She pushed on as fast as she could, but she felt helplessly sure she had gone more than a hundred yards, and yet she saw no sign of either fence or buildings. The clouding snow, dense as any fog, obscured her sight, and even familiar objects took on quite strange shapes, so that she walked close to a wagon and had no idea she had passed such evidence of human proximity. "Keep the storm to your back," Cross had called after her, but she was not experienced enough to note that the wind had veered half round, so that the direction no longer held good to take her to Simpson's farm.

She half ran for a few yards further, and then she grew afraid. She remembered stories she had heard of these western blizzards, of farmers wandering for days in their own fields and dying within a stone's throw of their homes; stories, too, of people disappearing and never being seen again till the melting snow disclosed their bodies. She tried to retrace her steps, she ran in confused directions, she began to call for help. For the moment she was panic stricken, and then by an effort she recovered her nerve.

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"But I will not die," she said fiercely. "I did not come so far to die." She set her lips more firmly together and resolved that she would not again give way; that she would struggle on so long as any strength remained. "I will not die," she repeated and again; "not yet, not till I have seen him again." She thought of why she had come to this country and the memory warmed her like a cordial. "For his sake," she said, "I will not die—not till he knows I have forgiven him."

Fortunately the worst fury of the storm, too sudden, as Cross had said, to last for long, was already exhausted, though still the wind blew and still the air was obscured with fast driving clouds of snow. Mrs. West did not know what would be the wisest course to follow, but instinct told her she must remain in movement so long as her strength lasted. On and on she walked, imagining that she had gone far and not knowing that she was circling back to the trail where Cross had left it. Then suddenly there came to her ears the sound of little bells, tinkling merrily, and evidently approaching her.

"Sleigh bells," she cried; "oh, how fortunate."

She ran in the direction from which the sound seemed to come and almost immediately, for the wind was growing calmer and the air clear of the flying snow, she saw a sleigh coming towards her at a rapid rate. She shouted excitedly in her sudden relief. As it reached her, it stopped short and there was a little cry of amazement.

"Why!" came a girl's clear young voice. "Are you alone? On foot? Is anything wrong?"

Mrs. West went to the side of the sleigh and began to explain. She saw that the girl who had spoken was the only occupant. Her words came quickly in her relief at

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no longer being alone in the storm; by her agitation her recent fear was plainly visible.

Before she was half way through her account, she was almost pulled inside and was comfortably placed beneath rugs and warm furs with her feet resting on something pleasantly warm—a hot stone she found afterwards.

"Mind you brush off the dry snow," said the girl, as she settled her comfortably, "or it will melt and that's horrid. Are you comfortable now?"

"Oh, quite, thanks," answered Mrs. West, glancing at her companion with interest; but she was so well wrapped up, her face hidden by a huge upturned fur collar and a warm cap drawn far down, that little could be seen except a pair of merry brown eyes and a mouth and nose that if large were at any rate well shaped.

"But how did it happen?" she asked. "Why! you might have been lost for ever so long."

Mrs. West gave a brief account of her drive, and her rescuer, whose name was Annie—Annie Leigh—cried out in indignation.

"It was too bad," she exclaimed, "to send you off through such a storm, and you a stranger; why, he ought to be ashamed—real ashamed."

Mrs. West went on with her story and Annie's indignation grew more intense.

"It was just a real shame," she said angrily. "You were going to Big End then?"

"Yes, is it far?"

"No," answered Annie, and turned her horse down another trail that was quite invisible to Mrs. West. "I'll take you there. That man Cross is not fit to be trusted with anything but a yoke of oxen."

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"Oh, I couldn't think of letting you do that," said Mrs. West, but Annie declared that it was not far and that she would have plenty of time.

"You see the storm is clearing now," she said; "it is quite bright again."

"But you are going in another direction."

"But you couldn't walk," said Annie laughing gaily. "And I don't want to leave you with such bad impressions of us. We don't usually send strangers wandering about the prairie in a blizzard, you know."

"But I have no bad impressions!" declared Mrs. West quickly. "I think everything is delightful."

"Even blizzards?"

"Oh, it was quite an interesting experience. And really I am sure I shall like everything intensely."

She spoke with an obvious sincerity that gratified Annie since to her the country was very dear. They went on talking as they drove along and Mrs. West gathered that Annie was the only daughter of a widowed farmer, that she had never lived anywhere but in this remote district, though her grandmother had given her a fairly good education, and that she had just been returning from Big End when she had met Mrs. West.

"And saved my life, I think," said Mrs. West.

"Oh, no," answered Annie blushing; "there was not much real danger. See how fine it is now."

Indeed the squall had quite passed away and except that the trail was drifted over with snow so that a stranger could hardly have found it, scarcely any trace of the recent storm remained. The sun was again shining and everything seemed calm and peaceful; the white snow sparkling brightly in the sun, although so lately

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it had hurtled through the air with such swift and vehement hostility.

Before long, for most of the distance had been covered with Cross, before the bursting of the squall, Annie was able to point out the village, a little group of straggling houses with the tall grain elevators standing up along the railway, black beneath their snow covered roofs.

"That is Big End," she said. "We shall be there soon now."

"Then you must come no further," said Mrs. West. "Let me walk from here, you have come far enough out of your way already."

"I couldn't dream of such a thing," said Annie in obvious surprise at the suggestion and touching her horse with the whip.

"But you must," insisted Mrs. West; "you told me you had been late starting and that your father would be anxious."

"Oh, but I didn't mean," cried Annie in a little panic of fear lest some hint had been suspected.

"I know you didn't," answered Mrs. West with a friendly smile. "But you see we are quite close now. You must really come no further."

"I simply couldn't think of it," said Annie with much decision.

"But I would really prefer it," repeated Mrs. West.

Annie still protested vehemently, but Mrs. West insisted and finally prevailed over the girl's objections. Very reluctantly she stopped the sleigh and allowed Mrs. West to alight.

"Though, after all," she added brightening up a little, "we have come most of the way, haven't we?"

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"Nearly a mile since I told you to stop," said Mrs. West, laughing. "It was too bad of you."

Bidding each other good-bye, Mrs. West again declared with earnestness her gratitude for her rescue and Annie said that she had to be in town again the next day and would be sure to see her.

"A singularly nice girl," murmured Mrs. West as she stopped and waved to Annie who was looking back and leaning from the sleigh. "A remarkably nice girl and I really think she saved my life in that awful storm. And I never asked her name. I wonder if John knows her. Poor John, dear John, how surprised he will be to hear I have already made a friend and had my first Canadian adventure."

She glanced from the sleigh, already at a considerable distance, to the little village before her and then at the great white plain that stretched so far away on either hand. Suddenly it seemed to oppress her, solitary and alone, with a sense of her own insignificance, and then again a wave of hesitation overtook her. She wished she had never started on this journey; she wished she were back at the Big Horn depot with the opportunity to return by the eastward train. She looked about her and now everything seemed bare and cold and desolate.

From a little isolated country village in the English midlands, bowered in trees and surrounded by deep lanes, where everything spoke of peace and man's settled dominion over Nature, she had come to this other village, even more isolated, standing bare and assertive on the open snow-covered prairie, almost visibly combative, with lying around it the raw new lands, marked with the evidence of man's still uncompleted struggle. Mrs. West

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looked about her with a little shudder, and again it came to her mind that she should return; for with the end of her journey so near her mind was troubled and her errand showed itself in new lights. Almost it seemed to her that the crude hardness of the new lands, showing, through the snow that here was hard and frozen and sparkling, called out to her, appealing to the harder qualities in herself. Her mind went back to earlier days and past events.

"Shall I, shall I return?" she said to herself, walking quickly up and down the trail to keep herself warm, yet careful to approach no nearer the village. "Oh, shall I return?"

She remembered how twenty years before—twenty years—she had left the church on her wedding day, walking by the side of the man she loved, and thinking to herself that this time at least the course of true love had run smoothly. Then, within three months of her wedding, she had found in her husband a but half conquered tendency to excessive drinking. She shivered afresh as she remembered the agony of that discovery, and then she thought with a warming heart of his sorrow, his shame, his efforts, his struggles to conquer the temptation. He had been a very handsome lad, strong and tall, and he had trusted her so implicitly, had looked to her so confidently for help. She felt the old love again, the love she had once thought dead, but that of late had lived again, and her face softened as she remembered that he had loved her very deeply.

Almost he had thrown off the habit, almost—till one day of excitement when he had come home with flushed face and wild eyes and she had smelt the brandy he had

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been drinking. She remembered her shamed and bitter anger, and thought again as she had thought so many times of late, that a little more kindness in her indignation might have made all the difference. He had gone out and returned and again she seemed to see herself in angry scorn, scourging him with slow bitter words, dropping scorn like vitriol, justly enough as regarded his drinking, unjustly when, infuriated, she had called up half held jealousy and coupled his name with that of a girl cousin. Even at the moment she had known how far astray her anger was taking her and had felt degraded by the words that still she flung at him, sullenly listening.

And then—the catastrophe—the brandy and the rage hot in him, like fire in his veins, till at yet another and more bitter word, with a sudden movement he had struck her down. She remembered the crashing blow and the swift darkness, and how even as she fell, her spirit had leaped in sorrow for him and the remorse she knew that he would feel. Reflectively she put up her hand and touched the scar and that left eye, blind since then.

For a month she had lain in the hospital and he in prison, while they waited to see whether she would live or die. And then that most dreadful day of all, when her shame and his had been laid bare for all the world to see. She remembered the court, crowded with white faces that all stared, till she saw nothing save everywhere eyes and eyes and always eyes. Her friends, her enemies, her acquaintances and utter strangers, all had stared together, making her shame a common show. At the time she had felt that the blow she might forgive, but not this, not this exposure. How she had hated them all; all—from the round-eyed gaping child that sat ignorantly on its

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mother's knee to the smug chairman of the magistrates with his platitudes and his odious sympathy.

He had been sentenced to a term of imprisonment and she had left the neighbourhood immediately. She knew that he repented bitterly, but when a letter reached her from him soon after his release, she returned it unopened. She heard in silence that he was about to sail for New York and when his father came to see her, to plead his son's sorrow, she returned no word but a bitter desire that she might never see his face again. For ten years she hugged her wrath to her soul saying, like the prophet of old, "I do well to be angry," and for ten years more she had striven still to keep it, while slowly the memory of the wrong done slipped away and the old love grew again—for he had been very dear to her. It had been a long and bitter struggle between them—between her anger and her love. "You are well rid of him," the magistrate had said, and for ten years she had believed him and for another ten years she strove to believe him. And she had been very lonely. At last she found where he had gone and now, after more than four thousand miles of travel, there was but one more between them, and yet that one more seemed longer than all those together, long and many and very weary, that lay behind her.

Very slowly she began to walk down the track. She pictured him to herself. It did not occur to her that he must have altered in appearance, that he might have changed in mind and temperament. To her he was what he had been—the bright, eager, handsome, hot-tempered youth. He stood before her, merry and excited, as he had done on the morning of the dreadful day that had ruined

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them both, and she felt that his punishment had lasted long enough.

"It has been long enough, too long," she said aloud, and now, her doubts and her hesitations altogether gone, she began to walk quickly towards the village, at times almost to run. "Poor John! Poor John, twenty years—oh! it was wrong, it was foolish, cruel to wait so long when I knew you were so sorry."

She pressed on, looking about her brightly. She felt an inclination to laugh, for the first time for twenty years she hummed a little snatch of song to herself. It seemed to her that she had been living in dreadful darkness from which she had suddenly emerged to find everything bright and beautiful. Now her only desire was to see her husband, to tell him she forgave, to see the half doubting happiness leap to his face, and then, when he understood, to feel his strong arms crush her to him—the harder, the tighter, the more fiercely, the happier she would be.

"Poor John," she murmured as she went, and she found that she was crying softly. "Dear John," she said with lingering tenderness.

CHAPTER III

TEN years before a stranger from the States, giving his name as Tom Deegan, had arrived at Big End, and seeing an opening in the hotel business had promptly established himself there. As there was no house available he had built one for himself, doing the greater part of the work with his own hands. Though not a very pretentious edifice, its owner regarded it with great pride. It was a square frame building with a deep verandah in front and, as Deegan was rather fond of remarking, "it was three steps high," though it is true the third floor was only represented by two attics. It possessed only six bed-rooms and two public apartments, the bar and dining room; but the inhabitants admired his pluck, took his enterprise as a compliment to the possibilities of the town, and Deegan found no difficulty in obtaining a licence and a fair share of patronage.

The other hotel was owned by a man named Cameron, who, in the possession of a monopoly had grown careless; but, on finding a tendency among his customers to depart to Deegan's, he had become alarmed and so a strong rivalry had at one time grown up between them. Now, however, things were fairly adjusted between them, and each had grown accustomed to the opposition of the other.

Of the two hotels, the "Deegan House" as its proprietor loved to call it, or "Deegan's" as it was more

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generally and more simply known, or the "Diggin's" as young and humorous Englishmen were wont to name it, was on the whole the more popular. In the comity of Big End, it, with Cameron's always as a rival, took the place of club and social centre, and at night its bar-room was generally well filled. In one respect, however, Cameron's held an undisputed advantage. Mrs. Cameron was a good cook, and by general consent her dinners were by far the best to be obtained in town.

For ten years Deegan lived thus in moderate prosperity, appreciating it to the full by contrast with his younger days and growing to think of it as permanent and natural, as part of the established order of things. He began to dress rather carefully, with a sense of his position as a prominent citizen. He even sent to Winnipeg for most of his clothing and his ties were of many colours. He took on flesh, too, and his once lean face grew round and fat. He possessed his soul in quietness and content, and his active hatred for Cameron changed into a mere mild dislike. He now had a theory that hard work could do anything and everything, and pointed to his hotel "built with my own hands" as proof, and he grew rather hard and suspicious towards those not so prosperous as himself. But on the whole he experienced a deep seated content towards life, and his character apparently quite changed, so that he hardly seemed the same as the eager restless man of fierce activity and harsh temper, who had first appeared in Big End.

Yet on this day as he sat by himself in the empty dining room, warming himself before the stove and wondering whether the sudden storm would induce any of his dinner-guests to stay all night, he was more like

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his old self. Lately a strong prohibitionist sentiment had swept through the country and at Big End had resulted in an agitation to do away with the licence of one of the hotels. Cameron was not only the older established, but he also had a large family of young children, and therefore Deegan knew that if a licence were revoked it would be his. This seemed to him quite obvious and natural, perhaps from some vague sentiment of chivalry towards the hardworked mother of so many little children for it was well known that Mrs. Cameron did most of the work of their hotel. Though this was a feeling he could not even have attempted to put into words, he, and indeed all concerned, entertained it simply as a matter of course, for simple minded and primitive country folk sometimes allow sentimental considerations to interfere most oddly with business matters. But all the same Deegan cherished hot and fiery indignation against the prime movers of the agitation; and on this day he was both angry and discomposed over some reports that had reached him of a new movement in the affair.

"Oh, curse 'em" he muttered; "why can't they leave an honest man alone? Seems most as though I was always to be hunted around and never allowed to rest in peace like other folks. The mean, lying—"

Muttering thunderously he turned his head on hearing a slight noise and started to find a woman standing in the doorway watching him. It was Mrs. West, who had found her way to the hotel with but little difficulty, but, who, unused to Western hostelries, felt now a little awkward and not quite sure she had come to the right place.

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Without moving—he was lying back in the chair with his feet on the stove—he looked at her and wondered who she might be. So far as he knew, and of course his bar was the centre for all the gossip of the neighbourhood, no one was expecting any visitor and certainly no stranger had arrived by the train that day. With curiosity he wondered how and when she had arrived and he took note of her appearance so as to be able to describe her in the saloon that evening to see if any one recognized her. As she looked at him Deegan was suddenly aware of an impulse to take his feet off the stove and sit upright, and so, resenting the impression, he leaned further back and taking out a plug of tobacco, bit off a piece and began to chew it vigorously.

"I beg your pardon," said Mrs. West, still standing in the doorway, "this is the hotel, I think. Can I get anything to eat here, do you know?"

"Why, certainly," he answered, though without moving.

At another time she might have been vexed, but now she only smiled.

"Who should I ask?" she said, after a little pause.

"Tain't time yet," he explained gruffly, and then added: "Dinner, twelve to two. Supper at six."

"Oh," she exclaimed, evidently rather taken aback; "must I wait till then?"

"Them's the hours," answered Deegan. He squirted tobacco juice at a distant spittoon with accuracy and then observed: "Come far?"

"From England."

"England, eh?" he repeated with obvious disparage-

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ment. "Sleepy place that. We's all alive here and don't you forget it."

"Oh, are you?"

"You bet. Going to stay here? Got any folk around?" Deegan's tone was a little less gruff now, he had worked off the worst of his temper and meant these questions to show a friendly interest. Besides he was beginning to feel a little ashamed of his gruffness; the more so he felt that this was, as he expressed it to himself, "a kinder high toned lady." Mrs. West was half amused, half annoyed; but now nothing had power to vex her for long—she could only see the most pleasant side of everything.

"My name is West," she said; "and I did think of staying here a short time. And though England may be sleepy, I could always get something to eat there if I were hungry."

"The Deegan House rules are never broken," answered Deegan. "Why, I wouldn't break 'em if Queen Victoria was to come in her crown and ask me herself."

"Well, I am only a very ordinary woman," said Mrs. West, secretly amused, "but I am very hungry." She looked at him again and meeting his glance she smiled. "I am really very tired," she added; "I have had no dinner as yet."

"Gosh!" he cried, bringing his feet down with a crash and nearly upsetting himself. "I'll hustle Pierre around, and mebbe we'll get something—though the Deegan House is mighty particular about hours."

He disappeared as he spoke, and Mrs. West looked after him with an amused smile.

"I do believe he went just because I smiled instead of

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being cross," she murmured and again she smiled to herself. "Poor dear John," she said, as though she saw some connection. The hard look on her face softened and the lines at the corners of her mouth disappeared, and then a faint—a very faint—blush showed on either cheek. "It is so long since I thought of such things," she murmured, "but I do wonder if I—if I am really ugly now. Years ago I suppose I was not bad looking—years ago, long ago." She blushed again and shook her head with a petulant movement, as though vexed with herself. "But perhaps John may not be exactly ashamed of me, if I am getting old and worn, and certainly to-day I do feel strangely young again; strangely, almost absurdly young," she repeated as though to deprecate her own annoyance.

She began to walk about the room, glancing round her and noticing everything with the eager pleasure of a child. Not being able to see with the left eye, she had acquired a trick of putting her head sharply to one side to get fuller views, and this, together with her slight active form, gave her a curiously birdlike appearance.

"Twenty years," she said once. "It is a long time—a long time to have suffered, but now we will be happy again—as I am already, as I am already." And suddenly she laughed with the low full laughter of exquisite joy.

In a few moments Deegan returned, bearing some dishes which he placed upon one of the tables.

"Now, ma'am," he said, "there's some grub—a meal, I mean—ready for you. I have to be particular about

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hours, you see, or the boys would just come in any old time."

"Thank you so much," she answered as she sat down. "I am sorry to have disturbed you."

Deegan took a seat near so that partly he watched her and partly the door in case any one else entered. He surveyed Mrs. West with benevolence, for he felt that he had been very good to her and quite redeemed his character for politeness, and he wished to confirm the good impression he felt he had made. He wished for an opportunity to tell her that Cameron would not have done such a thing. He got her one or two little things she wanted and he had forgotten and made a casual remark now and again, extracting from her a short account of her arrival. Presently she observed, wishing to acknowledge his attention,—

"How nice you have everything here."

"Fair, ma'am, only fair," he answered, but evidently much pleased at the compliment. "You see," he added with a burst of confidence, "I have no cook—nothing but a little Frenchman."

"That must be dreadfully awkward."

"It is so, ma'am; you see, you, bein' a woman, naturally catches on; but the boys only swear at the Frenchman. The trouble is, they all get married."

"Who?" asked Mrs. West gravely. "The cooks or the Frenchman?"

"The cooks, of course; not likely any one would take a little chattering Frenchman except out of charity. I took this one to clean out the stables but Polly skipped without a day's warning, so I asked him if he thought he could keep his end up in the kitchen. I'll allow he

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does his best, but if you believe me, he has simply no notion of making pie."

"Dear me!" said Mrs. West; "and did Polly get married then?"

"She did so—the ungrateful little cat—I brought her out from Chicago myself, and she got hitched in a month. Now, ma'am, I ask you what encouragement is there in that?"

Mrs. West smiled again and Deegan continued, full of his wrongs,—

"That's the third time I've got left, but never again. Why, that there Polly had the blame impudence to send her fellow over to ask for a weddin' present."

"And did you give him one?"

"I booted him out quicker nor a Chinaman could plant the ace of spades," said Deegan with some satisfaction. "But that didn't get me my cook back. Now the boys ask for pie every day just because they know the little Frenchman can't do 'em."

"It's too bad," said Mrs. West sympathetically. "There's only one thing that I can see."

"What is it?" asked Deegan eagerly.

"Marry the next one yourself."

"Not much; no, sir," he cried, with such vehemence that she broke into a merry peal of laughter, and he grinned, too, in sympathy.

"I beg your pardon," she said as she recovered her composure. "Really I don't know when I have laughed like that." Her face became suddenly grave for she did know; she remembered vividly how twenty years before her husband had come home with some joke over which they had laughed together—that was the last time. They

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had laughed so happily together—and then—and then—only the next day!

"Bless you, ma'am," said Deegan, misunderstanding her change of manner. "I don't mind. I suppose now, Mrs. West, ma'am"—he hesitated and then continued,— "I suppose you are fixed all right—you wouldn't care to take it on?"

Mrs. West shot a rapid glance at him. The spirit of mischief flashed across her face that for so long had known only tears and then—she could not resist the impulse, for her spirits were extraordinarily high:—

"Which?" she asked.

"Which?" he repeated puzzled, and then with an absolute blush he cried: "Great Scot, ma'am; the cookin', of course, not the marryin'." He looked so startled that she laughed again and he grinned and added: "Though, I guess, mebbe—"

"In any case I am afraid I am—fixed," interrupted Mrs. West with some haste.

"I knew it," he answered sadly. "I reckoned you would be too high toned for the job. Likely you have folk out here?"

"Yes," she answered.

Suddenly she found her cheeks were burning and she felt a great wonder at herself. To her relief some one outside called to Deegan and he hurried away, leaving her alone. She began to recover her composure a little and went to stand near the window, of double panes so that it was clear of frost. She thought again as she looked out at the empty snow-covered street, of the long lonely years and the weary journey that now was done. She thought of the climax, now so near, when she would

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see her husband again, and she was a little surprised at herself to find a relief in the knowledge that she could not see him until the next day. And she wondered, too, at the happiness, the excited joy that possessed her; she felt that this bare ugly room was better to her than any palace, and she remembered Deegan's rough talk as a miracle of homely wit and observation. She saw everything colored with her inward happiness and she murmured softly to herself: "To-morrow," and then "Dear John" and happy tears stole down her cheeks as she thought of that meeting, and his joy, and their renewed happiness that was to be. "Will he feel as happy as I do?" she whispered to herself and her heart answered her that he would be even happier. So she sat and dreamed till presently she heard Deegan's footsteps. He came into the room again and she began to ask him questions about the neighbourhood; and so presently came to the one name that really interested her.

"And Leigh?" she asked, quite pleased with herself that she pronounced the name with apparent unconcern. "Is there any one of that name? John Leigh," she added permitting herself to linger over the words with delicious fondness.

"Oh, yes; there's old man Leigh and John Leigh, too—they ain't friends of yours?"

"No," she answered; "not—not friends." A warm happiness swept through her and she had to stoop and pretend to pick up something that her burning face might not proclaim her secret. "No, not friends," she repeated.

A sense of the absurdity of such a word came over her and she had to struggle not to laugh, but Deegan did not

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notice anything for he was scowling and muttering angrily to himself.

"He says he's English, too," he observed presently.

"Don't you believe him?"

"There's something almighty queer about him, anyway. As for being English, they are mostly a poor mean lot, but I don't reckon he's one. I heard him ask for apple-pie once."

"But"—said Mrs. West puzzled. "I don't quite see—"

"Well," he explained, "an Englishman always says happle-pie, if you notice."

"Oh," said Mrs. West. "But do they all?" she ventured.

"All," answered Deegan with decision. "You can always tell 'em by that and their general meanness. If a fellow comes to my hotel and says he's an Englishman, I always ask for cash in advance; and if he says he's expecting a remittance from home, I just fire him out right away. English ladies is quite different," he added hastily, suddenly remembering and looking rather awkward. He continued to cover his confusion that if she liked, Mrs. Edwards, the bar-tender's wife, would take her to her room. He explained that she acted as house-keeper for him. Mrs. West was feeling very tired after her journey and was glad, though it was still quite early, to retire to rest herself.

Accordingly he summoned Mrs. Edwards, an old, almost infirm woman, and then just as Mrs. West was following her from the room, he asked her again:

"Say, you're certain that there John Leigh ain't no friend of yours?"

"No," she answered slowly, "not a friend." A happy

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smile played about her lips and as she followed her guide up the narrow stairs she repeated to herself: "No, not a friend, not a friend; oh, why did I wait all these years? No, not a friend."

Her lips lingered lovingly over the words.

CHAPTER IV

ALTHOUGH at some inconvenience, Mrs. West had still been able to manage for the one night without her luggage, which of course had been left in the train; but it was with dismay that she found on coming downstairs the next morning that it had not yet arrived. The railway officials explained that the baggageman must have forgotten to put it out and promised to telegraph down the line and recover it for her by the evening. Mrs. West had arisen all afire with eager impatience to seek out her husband, but now she determined she must wait until she was able to change her dress and generally to tidy herself after her long journey.

"He thought me pretty once—long ago," she said to herself. "I must not give him a bad impression now, or let him think I have grown sloven as well as old."

Determined then to wait till her luggage arrived, she finished her breakfast leisurely and after a little went out to survey the village. Her mind was full of pleasant anticipations as she started for her first walk in this place where he had sojourned for so long. She pictured him in her mind, striding along this sidewalk or stopping to chat with some acquaintance at that corner. "This very afternoon," she repeated to herself with a kind of wonder. She repressed an inclination to break into song as she left the hotel.

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After the storm of the day before the morning had broken bright and fine, the sun shining brilliantly. A gentle south-westerly wind was blowing and although Mrs. West did not know it, signs were that day apparent for the first time of the breaking up of the long frost. The snow, hitherto as hard and dry as crystals, was beginning to thaw in places; and each long icicle pendent from every place of vantage, was letting little gay-colored drops fall softly to the ground. There was a greater stir and bustle, too, in the village, as though in preparation for the renewed life of the spring. Mrs. West noticed how cheerfully were hailed the drivers of two or three teams that came in from the country, and she noticed, too, that she herself was an object of some interest,—a fact that amused her very much.

She went on slowly, returning the scrutiny of the inhabitants with frank interest, and it seemed to her that she had never seen a more intelligent or amiable looking set of people. She contrasted favourably the smart brisk looking men with the slow heavy peasantry she had been used to, and she told herself that no one could have guessed these pleasant, neatly dressed women to live in so remote a district. She pictured herself making their acquaintance, her husband introducing her, and she smiled to think of their surprise. She looked at the little frame houses, too, and found them charming; and decided that the stores would not have been out of place in a country town in England of ten times the size. Then she began to amuse herself by picking out among the people those with whom she thought she would become most friendly, and then with quite a keen sense of pleasure she recognized her acquaintance of the day before.

"A really remarkably handsome girl," she observed in

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an undertone as she caught sight of her, and she stopped to admire her.

The girl was indeed really a striking figure, but not from any special beauty. Her features were too irregular for that and her mouth too large; but she was of unusual height and she carried herself with a springing strength that might well have attracted attention. To Mrs. West's fancy she would have formed a fitting heroine for some old Norse saga of battle and revenge; and she was still watching her with attention when a voice called "Miss Annie," and a young man came out of one of the stores and hurried towards her. Mrs. West saw with increased interest that though not a particularly small man, his height did not equal that of the girl he addressed. She herself was small and slender, and she had always had a particularly great admiration for physical strength and size—it was that which in days gone by had first attracted her to John Leigh, and that he should so misuse his great gift to which she had entrusted her protection, had been even in her deepest grief a yet added touch of degradation.

Mrs. West waited a little until the young man turned away and then she moved forward. Annie, looking up, caught sight of her, and came quickly to meet her.

"I am so glad to see you," said Mrs. West smiling as they shook hands. "It is quite a treat to meet some one who does not regard me as a curiosity."

"You see they all know you are a stranger," answered Annie with a shy smile that acknowledged the charm of the other's manner. "It is such a little place," she added with an air of apology.

"Oh, I don't mind," said Mrs. West. "It is rather nice, I think, friendly."

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Annie glanced at her quickly, ready to resent any suspicion of irony, but obviously the words were sincere.

"Isn't it vexing?" continued Mrs. West, "my luggage has gone astray. I must buy some things I want. Perhaps you can tell me where to go?"

She began to ask questions about the different stores, and she accepted Annie's advice on various little details. Walking up and down talking, and then consulting together in the dry goods store, they became quite intimate. Mrs. West thought she had never met so pleasant and charming a girl, and Annie thanked the chance that had sent so desirable an addition to her scanty list of acquaintances.

"Do you expect to be staying long?" she asked once.

"I think so," said Mrs. West slowly. She had a sudden impulse to question the girl about her husband. But she remembered she had already inquired about him once, and that to ask again might possibly start some rumour. She felt it would be very dreadful if he were to gain any hint of her proximity save from herself alone, and so she put aside the impulse. "I rather hope so," she continued; "it seems such a nice little place."

"Well, I do hope you will," said Annie with frank friendliness, her heart still further won by this praise, since as a rule Big End did not earn very enthusiastic praise from its visitors. "There are so few people out here, you know; it is not like Chicago or Winnipeg. Perhaps you will find it a little strange, settling down here; if you do, will you let me come to help you? There are sure to be things that will seem strange at first—and you are not much used to roughing it, are you?"

"Why, no; I suppose not." Mrs. West looked down at herself with some amusement. It suddenly occurred

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to her that her dress and whole appearance were not very appropriate to pioneer surroundings. She glanced up at Annie and they both laughed a little.

"I don't suppose you have done much scrubbing or washing, have you?" asked Annie; "and here it is next to impossible to get any help."

"No-o," admitted Mrs. West, a little dismayed. "But I can learn," she added more brightly and they both laughed again.

At that moment the young man who had previously spoken to Annie came out of the store opposite and glanced about as though looking for her.

"Will you excuse me just one moment?" said Annie as she saw him. "Mr. Briscoe is getting some nails and things for father."

She went across to him and they spoke together for a moment, but apparently the point proved a difficult one to settle. They went together into the store, and after a moment or two, as Annie did not come out, Mrs. West walked a little way further up the street and went into the post-office to inquire for her letters. There were none—indeed there had been no time yet for any to overtake her—but the post-mistress was very inquisitive and even Mrs. West's determination to be pleased at everything broke down a little before her persistent cross-questioning. It was some minutes before she could even get assured that there were no letters, and when at last she did escape outside, hoping to see again Annie, to whom she had taken a strong liking, the girl had disappeared. For some time Mrs. West wandered on, quietly happy, dreaming of the man she had not seen for twenty years, whom she had left under stress of intolerable provocation, but whom she had always loved.

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It did not occur to her that his love might not have survived the long separation—if that possibility had been suggested to her she would have laughed it away, for she knew the strength and simplicity of his nature and on it rested her faith securely. She felt that their love was yet as strong, in spite of all that had happened, as on the morning of their marriage day. She wandered on, drawing great breaths of the invigorating prairie air, and it was to her as though the last twenty years had not existed—had been but an ugly dream.

"How young I feel," she murmured once, detecting in herself an inclination to laugh at trifles. "How strangely young," she murmured again.

She wandered on through the little settlement. She made one or two trifling purchases more and then—the day continuing very fine—she went on a little beyond the houses to the open prairie. Everything was so novel and her day dreams so pleasant, that she did not notice how the time passed till suddenly she found it getting late. She remembered that the hotel keeper, Deegan, had spoken of noon for dinner, and that he had seemed very particular about meal hours. She at once started back for the hotel walking rather quickly; everything seemed to her so pleasant that she did not wish to annoy any one, even in trifles. However it was later than she had thought, and dinner was nearly over when she arrived; the room when she entered being empty but for Deegan himself, and one other man who greeted her with an embarrassed grin and in whom she recognized, after a moment's hesitation, Jim Cross, her driver of the day before. As soon as he saw her enter Deegan came up to tell her her luggage had arrived, news she was very glad to receive. Then he brought her her dinner, explaining that

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"the little cuss of a Frenchman" was busy washing up.

"Say," he said abruptly as she began to eat. "You know that there John Leigh you was askin' about a while back?"

"Yes," she answered bending over her plate, fearing she would surely betray herself by the colour that flamed in her cheeks whenever he was mentioned.

"I saw his cutter in town—this morning."

"Oh," she said faintly.

It made her heart go wildly to think she might have been near to him—might even have met him. A hundred questions came to her mind. How would he have looked? What would he have said? Would he have altered much? By a great effort she recovered her self-possession and looked up, fearing Deegan might have noticed her agitation. But he was looking away from her and drumming angrily upon the table with the handle of a knife, while Cross remained apparently engrossed with his meal.

"You're sure he ain't no friend?" continued Deegan.

"Not a friend exactly," answered Mrs. West with her secret amusement at such a term applied to the man for whose sake she had come so far. "But why?"

"Because some day," said Deegan solemnly, "him and me's goin' to scrap, and when we do you want to take a ticket for the front row, for the show'll be worth seein'—and that's a fact."

"To — to —" she repeated. She did not quite understand, but she gathered that there was a quarrel of some sort between them. "But why?" she asked.

"Him and his pa—old man Leigh—are prohibitionists, ma'am, the—the dodrotted worms, and they want to close down this hotel—the Deegan House of Big End—doing

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their level best, too. Want the boys to live on cold coffee and buttermilk," he added with a gesture of infinite scorn.

"Indeed," said Mrs. West, but she did not find this news surprising—plainly it was one side of her husband's repentance.

"He ain't no chicken," continued Deegan gloomily, "and I have been there before; so him and me'll have a regular picnic together some day. His pa's too old to touch, or I'd lay for him first, seein' he's the worst, if anything."

"Is he?"

"Yes, there's something queer about him—John Leigh. Folks do say he did a murder in the old country, and I shouldn't wonder a great deal if it wasn't true. If you'll believe me, ma'am, he always acts as though he was kinder scared of whisky."

"Scared—frightened of it?"

"Yes, ma'am; sounds childish and unnatural, I know. But I took out a glass to him one day, wantin' to be friendly, an' he never said a word—just whipped up his horse and lit out like wild Indians was after him."

"Poor fellow, poor, poor fellow," murmured Mrs. West, and there was an infinite tenderness in her tone—it seemed to show all he had suffered, the picture of that strong man galloping away at the mere sight of his ancient enemy. Her whole heart yearned towards him.

"Yes'm; and then one day his daughter—"

"His what?" said Mrs. West, and her voice was low and terrible.

"His daughter, Miss Annie—I heard you was chattin' to her this mornin' in town."

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"His what, his what?" said Mrs. West again, as though she had not heard.

"Why, that tall girl, Miss Annie," answered Deegan again, a little annoyed at having to repeat his words.

"She—was she his daughter? And his wife then?"

"Oh, she's dead, died a while back, she was a New Yorker—he married her soon as he came to this country, I believe. Anyway, he's awful fond of the girl 'cause she's like her ma."

"Oh," said Mrs. West, the little groan forcing itself between clenched teeth. That he could be so faithless to her and so soon—to marry again though he knew she was alive, to marry again with his words of sorrow and remorse hot upon his tongue, to marry again and so soon, to marry again with the still fresh memory of the wrong he had done her that yet could not prevent him from doing her one greater still, to marry again and cherish a child in memory of this dead intruder. Mrs. West felt as though all things earthly slipped away from her; the room, the world itself, all went from her, down and down, till her spirit floated alone, solitary in space—and she was aware alone of a tiny insistent voice that summoned her back to earth, to life and dreadful pain. She did not wish to heed it, the voice troubled her, she desired to stay for ever, floating in space, indifferent to the pain that lay below. But the small voice persisted, gradually things began again to take visible shape before her, and as the rushing blood receded to its accustomed channels, she understood where she was, distinguished the little dinner tables, and Deegan at her side tilting something to her lips and exclaiming:

"Drink this, ma'am, drink this."

Without conscious will she obeyed and the strong raw

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whisky confirmed her hesitating senses, she even became aware that it was hot and unpleasant in her mouth.

"Tea," she gasped half-choking, and impatiently moved her head.

"Cæsar!" cried Deegan; "I made sure you was gone. There's tea, but have some more whisky. It'll do you good," he urged.

"No," answered Mrs. West; "I am all right now, thanks." The whisky, of which she had taken enough to make her insensible under ordinary conditions, enabled her to recall her powers, and the strength given to her by twenty years' stern self-repression came now to her aid. "It must be the result of that storm yesterday," she said quietly; "it must have over-tired me."

"Yes, ma'am, I suppose," said Deegan, but still looking at her anxiously; and she noticing the expression pushed away her plate with an angry exclamation that the steak was burnt.

"I know it," said Deegan sadly, his attention at once diverted by this manœuvre. "If only I could find some one to take the job on—that blame little cuss of a Frenchman is gettin'—" He picked up the plate with the steak and looked at it, lost in gloomy contemplation.

By an effort Mrs. West still held herself with the appearance of recovered calm. She felt almost as though in her were two brains, one raging in mad fury and one thinking in an icy calm. With a hand that hardly trembled she drew her cup of tea nearer and helped herself to milk and sugar.

"Would I—do?" she asked; for one brain urged her to rush out screaming and destroy, something, anything, herself; and the other brain showed her the need for waiting and for self-control, and hinted, still hinted, of

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the future; bidding her seize this opportunity of remaining in the village without arousing curiosity.

"Cæsar's American!" cried Deegan; "I only wish you meant it."

"I do," she answered. "Quite. Will I do?"

Again she felt as though all things swam before her and there was a clamouring in her brain. Her head felt as though it were twisting on her shoulders and she raised both hands to it.

"Sixteen! Blue blazes! sixteen," cried an excited voice as she moved and Cross sprang to his feet. "Sixteen," he repeated, "it's a holy fact."

"What are you talking about, Jim? Shut your mouth, making a row like that," cried Deegan angrily, moving towards him.

"She put sixteen solid spoonfuls of sugar in that tea," cried Cross. "I saw 'em, I counted 'em." He looked at Mrs. West with an air of mingled awe and amazement. "Do you always take it that sweet?" he asked curiously.

Mrs. West stared at him and then at her cup of tea. She saw it had overflowed into the saucer and on to the tablecloth, and feeling with a spoon she found it full nearly to the brim with half-melted sugar. Her countenance expressed her surprise.

"All the time you was talkin' you was pilin' it in," explained Cross. "Didn't you know?" he asked with evident disappointment.

"No," answered Mrs. West. She looked at the odd mess in her cup and she began to laugh—a gentle low laughter with no merriment in it at all. Deegan grinned in rather a puzzled way and then Cross began to stamp about the room, choking with loud laughter.

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"She didn't know," he shouted between the gusts of his merriment, and then Deegan joined him, almost as boisterously, and Mrs. West continued her low unchanged laughter. So they three laughed together, while slowly Mrs. West felt the cold despair that had chilled her heart giving place to a yet colder rage. Still they laughed together, and impatient voices called from the bar to know what the joke might be.

"You see," she said aloud presently, "it is always nervous work to apply for a situation—so that must have made me forget what I was doing."

Still laughing, she went out of the room and upstairs and sat upon her bed. Still she laughed for she did not think to stop herself, and she felt that all her being was changed to one vast hate.

"And I travelled four thousand miles to forgive him," she said, and now she did not laugh for it came to her that she must control herself. "Four thousand miles," she repeated and writhed with the bitterness of her self-contempt. "And I feel so very old," she added weakly after a long pause.

From below she heard a fresh gust of laughter and a voice call: "Oh, say, boys; tell us what the joke is, anyway."

CHAPTER V

TO the surprise and intense delight of Deegan, Mrs. West proved not only to be in earnest in her expressed determination to undertake the duties of cook and housekeeper in general to the hotel, but also seemed to show every indication of staying permanently. Pierre, the little Frenchman, was deposed from his position as cook to become dishwasher, and never since Big End had been a settlement had its inhabitants known such meals. True, Mrs. West was lamentably weak in pancakes, and did not seem thoroughly to appreciate their eternal fitness for breakfast, but her pies won enthusiastic approval. By the end of the first week Deegan even found young bachelors riding in for the sole purpose of obtaining a decent meal, a change from the accustomed fried bacon and stewed tea of their shanties.

The only drawback to Deegan's happiness was the fear that she might leave him. Under the influence of this dread he watched her closely, and soon became reassured. Yet there seemed something strange about her, and little Pierre went about his duties in open fear, declaring that she was too *'triste'* to live with, and from his manner it seemed that he meant more than *'triste.'* "She talks to herself," he said once to Deegan, who only bade him "go to blazes." Nevertheless he was so far impressed by the change in her manner since the first day of her

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arrival that he asked her what was wrong, and received for reply a cold indignant stare that drove him from the kitchen in confusion. But she kept very much to herself and the matter ceased to interest him, especially as the number of diners increased daily.

Deegan could not have explained exactly what it was that seemed unusual about Mrs. West, and that made him vaguely but unmistakably uneasy. She appeared to be thoroughly engrossed in her kitchen, and seeing her bustling with the daily meals no one could have guessed at the long wakeful nights of tearless agony or at the slow gathering anger within, that gradual change of frozen misery to fiercer rage, which threatened before long to find for itself some issue or another. Carefully mixing her cakes, or anxiously watching the baking of her pies and biscuits, she appeared the very type of a busy careful housewife, and one would have laughed to suppose that she brooded on the memory of intolerable wrongs.

Never once in all that time, that long nightmare of suppressed suffering, did she in any way betray the feelings that possessed her—only each day she grew more and more silent, and her face took fresh and deeper lines.

So the days passed and still she brooded to herself in silence, when, one afternoon, just as she had finished clearing up after the dinners were over—now she appreciated the strictness of the rule as to hours—Deegan came quickly into the kitchen and told her not to be alarmed, nor to heed it if she heard any unusual noise.

"Why?" she asked, looking up and displaying some interest, rather to the surprise of Deegan; but the idea

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of a fight, of trouble, seemed to appeal to her and to fit in with her gloomy thoughts.

"Oh, it's nothing," he answered; "only I don't want you to get scared."

She questioned him further; and, pressed, he explained that Jim Cross was in the bar, raging drunk and clamouring for more whisky.

"You see, ma'am, I know just the state he has got to. If he don't have more, he'll get real mad; and if he do, he'll get plum crazy. Either way he'll turn loose and then there'll be trouble. So if you hear a row, you just lay low and say nothin'. He has a gun with him, too."

"Oh," said Mrs. West and on a sudden impulse she turned and walked out of the kitchen into the saloon. She could not have explained why she went even to herself, but she felt a need for action: her long brooding had grown intolerable and now some outlet had become imperative.

In the saloon, sitting at a small table, she found Cross. In front of him stood an unopened whisky bottle, and in each hand he held one other, taking from them alternate drinks. As yet he was not acutely quarrelsome and when she entered he greeted her with a boisterous shout, and an invitation to "step up and have some poison."

"Come and have some forty rod," he yelled, beating the floor with his heels. "Good old kill-me-quick," he shouted.

Mrs. West looked at him steadily, wondering how she could induce him to go away quietly, for then she had no other thought in her mind. As in some perplexity she glanced towards the door, she saw the figure of a man pass by—a tall strongly built figure with bent head

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and a curious dragging walk ; a figure that once had been familiar to her, that once had been dear to her. All expression left her face and she stared after him, stiff and breathless.

"What's wrong?" inquired Jim in the genial tones of an intoxication still in the happy stage. "Step up, ma'am, and have some forty rod ; Deegan's Sunday best poison this is, ma'am."

"Who was that passed?" she asked slowly.

"That? Oh, that was John Leigh," answered Deegan from behind, and hearing the name, Cross began to swear and then became profusely apologetic.

"Darn interferin' cuss! Wants to take our whisky away," he explained and took another drink.

"It's just my luck, too, that he should be in town," said Deegan gloomily. "Now if there's trouble he'll hear of it right away. Jim, why the blazes can't you go away quietly? You don't want to make me lose my licence, do you?"

"Certainly not, not by a long sight," said Cross amiably. "Let's go and lynch him. Come and have some poison, and cuss all them interferin' fellows."

"So that was John Leigh," said Mrs. West slowly. She gave a short quick laugh, intolerably harsh, almost like a dog's bark ; so that Deegan stared at her and even the bemused Jim blinked solemnly up.

"See here, ma'am," said Deegan ; "there's bound to be trouble, you clear *if* you please."

Without answering she walked to the table where Cross sat and picked up the bottle that stood before him. Still without speaking, she next took from him the other two bottles, he too astonished to resist, and then she moved

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away towards the bar, carrying the three in her arms. For a moment he sat with open mouth, hardly comprehending such astonishing occurrences, then with a wild whoop he sprang to his feet and began to jump up and down, knocking his heels together at each bound and giving shrill yells. Deegan moved quickly forward, his right hand held awkwardly behind him, already considering where his first shot should be placed.

"Even in this blame slow country," he muttered; "they are bound to admit shootin' is necessary now."

"What's the matter?" asked Mrs. West over her shoulder as she leaned across the bar to set down the bottles she carried.

Cross stopped his antics and looked at her. He did not quite understand but he was furiously angry, and the spirits he had drunk were quickly affecting him now that he was taking no fresh stimulant to preserve the balance.

"You better give me that stuff back, ma'am," he said, "or there'll be trouble, a whole heap of trouble and mighty quick. Hustle now, you hear me?"

"Not on any account," said Mrs. West briefly as she placed the last bottle in its place.

"Then some one's going to get hurt," said Cross.

Immediately both men moved and faced each other with revolvers securely grasped, though not yet openly shown. Suddenly Mrs. West stood between them, unheeding Deegan's cry of dismay.

"You can't possibly have that whisky," she said to Cross.

"I guess I can." His speech was clear and his hand firm, for as yet the spirit had only affected his brain and he

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showed no sign of drink, except a gentle swaying, backwards and forwards, and a wild glitter in his eyes. Mrs. West saw it and knew it—such a glitter in a man's eye she had seen before—twenty years before. "Why not?" he repeated. Still he swayed backwards and forwards, and very gently, by almost imperceptible degrees, his right hand began to steal forward from the shelter of his coat.

"Listen," said Mrs. West in clear sharp tones; "you can't have any more whisky, because—because—"

"Because why, darn ye, why?"

Now his pistol showed clearly and in the background Deegan groaned and looked wildly about him, for he dared not fire while Mrs. West stood between them, and yet thought that now his only hope was to get the first shot.

"Why?" repeated Mrs. West. "Why? Go and ask—why—John Leigh."

"Him?" cried Cross and his whole expression changed. "Oh," he said: "I'll fix him up."

To his disturbed and excited mind it seemed now that all was explained. He rushed from the saloon and they heard him running down the street. Mrs. West and Deegan looked at each other and there was silence in the room. Then Deegan moved to help himself to a drink, and Mrs. West became busy, polishing at a brass rail near at hand. Deegan said in a low tone:

"He'll kill him."

"He has had too much drink," she answered hurriedly. "He has had far too much drink. His hand trembles."

"He will kill him," repeated Deegan.

Mrs. West shook her head without speaking. She

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ceased to rub at the brass rail. Presently she said with an abstracted air: "He will only scare him."

"He'll kill him," repeated Deegan. "Sure as shootin', he'll kill him."

"Well," she answered; "and if he does?" She moved to the window. "And if he does?" she repeated over her shoulder.

Deegan looked at her in a puzzled way. He seemed to consider this, turning it over in his mind. Then he said:

"Dear God! He'll kill him."

To this she made no answer for some moments—then she turned and came swiftly towards him. As she came he shrank back, almost as though he were afraid, into the corner where the bar met the wall.

"Is he your friend?" she asked.

"No, no," he answered.

"Nor mine," she said.

"But you see," he began, then stopped and continued. "And there's the licence and—" He broke off abruptly, thinking he heard a noise in the distance. He made a movement as though to go to the door. She resumed,—

"He and his father—they'll close this place."

Deegan did not answer but drummed angrily on the bar while she continued:

"They'll shut you down—close this place tight."

"Oh, well," he answered as though defying her; "there's the dinners."

"There will be no drink—nothing but tea and coffee."

"But the dinners pay. Gosh, they pay good—since you come." Now it seemed as though he were trying to placate her. "Awful good," he urged, "since you come."

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"I'll not stay," she answered gloomily. "I'll go if they are to do what they like." Her face took on an expression of extraordinary animosity. "The horrid hypocrites," she cried; "but I'll go."

"Oh, well," he said as though yielding to her. "I hope he's dead."

"Cross was too drunk, too shaky," she answered quickly, starting as though she had not expected such words. "There was no danger, no real danger at all." She looked at him anxiously through the malign scowl that darkened her face. "There was no danger, no real danger?" she asked.

"Gosh!" he cried; "yes, no, I don't know. Lord," he said, "I—I don't understand."

"There was no danger," said Mrs. West again, and then lifted her hand for silence.

Quite plainly at a little distance they heard pistol shots in rapid succession.

"Oh, God! my God!" groaned Mrs. West and fell half fainting to a chair.

CHAPTER VI

BEWILDERED between his desire to help Mrs. West and his desire to ascertain the result of the shooting, Deegan remained helplessly in the saloon; sometimes proffering her assistance and asking her how she did, and sometimes looking eagerly from door or window. But still the street lay quiet and deserted, and it almost seemed as though none had heard or heeded those ominous reports save themselves alone.

At last with a little cry Deegan told her that Cross was coming, and as he spoke he turned quickly as though fearing the effect of the announcement upon her. But Mrs. West seemed to pay little attention; and when he repeated the remark she moved impatiently and began to busy herself tidying some disarranged glasses, yet with hands that shook perceptibly as from cold. Deegan turned from her with an angry exclamation and saw Cross standing in the doorway.

"Hullo," said Deegan speaking with an effort, his eyes eagerly scanning him for some hint of how the affair had gone.

"Hullo yourself," answered Cross and walked into the room.

He did not speak again but sat straddling across a chair, glancing about him with an abstracted air. Deegan watched him with sidelong looks, half ashamed and half

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afraid; and Mrs. West, after one short glance, indifferently continued her tidying, but all at once her hands grew steady again as though her anxiety had been relieved.

"Well," said Deegan in a minute or two, the silence becoming unbearable to him. He cleared his throat and repeated again: "Well, Jim; how goes it?" He tried to speak carelessly, but his voice broke at the last word so that it came out half strangled, between a scream and a sob.

"It lays me out," said Cross and looked about him with the same air of bewilderment, as though he needed the sight of familiar things to bring him into touch with reality again. "It lays me out altogether—you hear me?"

He threw the last words at Deegan as though they were a challenge; but the other's eager "Yes, Jim; well, Jim?" seemed to pacify him.

"It just bests me and that's all there is to it," he repeated. "I came up as close as you is to me now, and I said: 'So you're the fellow that wants to take my whisky away, are you?' 'That's so,' he answers, as cool as ice, 'for a deal too much you've had, my man.' So I says 'I'll "my man" you, you dodrotted Britisher, you,' and I draws my gun, and I lets loose. Six shots, sir, as near as you is to me, or maybe an inch or two nearer; and as fast as I could pull the trigger and not a one of them hit. Not one, so I guess I must have been awful drunk. And he stood there, cool and sorter tired, like he didn't care a cent, with his eyes shut and mouth a-goin' like he was chewin' a plug. Then I stopped; my gun bein' empty, and he spoke up like a feller firin' his hired man what ain't no good; kind of bothered and annoyed like, you

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know, and sort of sorry, too. 'Well,' he says, 'if you're tryin' to kill me, you are a most mighty bad shot; and if you're tryin' to scare me you're a still bigger fool.' It made me all funny inside, like drinkin' too much ice water when you're hot, and then he sees me tryin' to load up again and he says quick and sudden, 'Give me that.' Tom Deegan, I done it; honest Injun, I done it—seemed as though I'd just got to. Then he started in to talk, and, Lord—I felt mean—just real mean—not fit to live. To hear him you'd wonder I didn't crawl into a hole and die right away, only you'd a-seen he was kind o' sorry about it, too. Say, he's a real good sort, a plum dandy, and don't you forget it. But he shouldn't have called me 'my man,' " he added resentfully after a moment's pause.

"Cæsar!" said Deegan. "And he got your gun. Cæsar's American!" He contemplated Jim with unconcealed and unflattering amazement. "Great Cæsar's American Ghost! I never heard anything to equal *that*. Gave him his gun," said Deegan, appealing to the universe to note the fact.

"And he told you not to drink?" asked Mrs. West suddenly.

She had finished the tidying that had occupied her and now stood leaning against the bar, surveying the two men with a slight sneering smile.

"That's so," said Jim, "and I promised—promised solemn—and shook hands on it."

"The lying hypocrite!" whispered Mrs. West to herself, and a quick fury distorted her face, then passing away left it placid as before. It angered her most intensely, so that the rage ran liquid in her veins, to think that he—~~he~~—should preach of temperance. For the minutes just past remorse had held her—remorse and fear commingled

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—but they had gone completely with the relief at finding him unhurt. Now in their place grew an insistent rage, for she saw clearly how much better a man Cross would be if he were to become an abstainer, and it maddened her to think that her traitor husband should have credit for such a result. She contrasted her deed, an incitement to murder now that she looked at it coolly, with his, the taming of a desperate man. She perceived that he had made her revenge innocuous and absurd, twisting it to his own advantage. It seemed to her that they had met in a struggle and that he had won with ease: even that he had behaved so to Cross that he might contrast himself with her and show his superiority. She compared what he had done to her with what he had said to Cross, and in the glaring discrepancy found moral justification for her intentions. "It is only right to expose him," she muttered, half aloud; "such a lying mischievous hypocrite. But I must be more cunning—much more cunning—like him."

She looked up again and saw the two men staring solemnly at each other, apparently overwhelmed at these unprecedented events. She prepared two glasses of whisky and walking down the room placed them silently on the table and stood aside to watch the result with her little sneering smile.

"It's queer," said Deegan, the first to move, "it's mighty peculiar." Picking up one glass he drank off the contents.

"I never struck anything like it," said Cross; and he, too, drank—slowly and rolling the liquor on his tongue in complete forgetfulness of his promise. Mrs. West watched him and she gave her little dry laugh, for it pleased her immensely that he should so soon break the promise that

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he had given. Suddenly he sprang away with a cry. "I forgot," he exclaimed. "Lord! I clean forgot."

Deegan looked up in surprise and Mrs. West laughed again. Instantly his anger turned on her.

"Curse you," he roared; "and it was you set me after him, you—you—" he spluttered in his anger, seeking words ineffectually, and he moved forward with lifted hand. "I'll learn you," he growled, "I'll learn you to break my promises."

He made a threatening movement and then at a bound Deegan leaped to his side and knocked him senseless with a sudden furious blow behind the ear.

"Oh!" cried Mrs. West. "Oh!" She knelt by the prostrate man. "Oh, how could you?" she asked reproachfully. "Poor, poor fellow."

Deegan put his hands in his pocket and watched her in sulky anger while she rated him for his brutality and placed Cross in a more comfortable position, carefully examining his head to see if it were bleeding. Then she told Deegan to go for some water. He had a mind to refuse at first, but she despatched him with an angry gesture and he obeyed, muttering unintelligibly to himself.

At last a neighbour was found returning near Cross's homestead, and, a little to the regret of Mrs. West, who would rather have liked to undertake the nursing herself, he promised to take Cross home. As they watched them go, Mrs. West turned to Deegan and said with the first genuine smile he had seen her give since the day of her arrival.

"I am glad he seems all right, but it was a shame to hit him so hard."

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"He would have hit you," retorted Deegan sulkily; if he had dared he would have added that he was sorry he had interfered.

"Oh, no; he wouldn't have hit me," returned Mrs. West with an air of impartial consideration. "Not when it came to the point—I don't think he would have hit me."

Deegan did not answer, but he moved away, muttering something rather sulkily to himself. He felt disturbed and angry at the train of events that had occurred that afternoon. They were outside his usual experience and anything unusual always annoyed him. He loved the quiet, placid life he lived in his hotel, and any idea of change was abhorrent to him. He felt inclined to blame Mrs. West for everything, and also he felt that she had treated him very ungratefully over his attack on Jim. "Dare say, though, she'd 'a' fussed over me if I'd happened to sprain a thumb," he muttered with laboured sarcasm, unaware that he was speaking the exact truth. A few minutes later he came back and was surprised to find her in the same position, almost in the same attitude—apparently she had not moved since he had left her.

"Mr. Deegan," she called as he came in sight.

He pretended not to hear but she called again, more loudly this time, and he came towards her, for he still felt in a vague, undefined way that he was just a little afraid of her—she was so outside all his previous knowledge.

"I wanted," she said; "I wanted to ask you—" She stopped, seeming to have a difficulty in putting her question, for after half beginning again she lapsed into silence. Deegan sat down near by, and stared sulkily at his outstretched feet.

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"I hope you didn't think me rude about that man," she said suddenly. "It was very good of you." She looked at him with a smile that still became her well, and that in her youth had been her chief charm. "Very kind of you," she repeated.

"Oh, it's all right," he answered, still sulkily. "I don't mind—only if he had got that blow in—" He paused, leaving the probable result to her imagination.

"It would have 'settled' me?" suggested Mrs. West, and suddenly she gave again that odd, barking laugh that always so disconcerted him. "That would have been such a pity," she commented presently.

"It would," said Deegan earnestly; "them pies—"

But she interrupted him with another and more natural laugh, and, still more offended, Deegan rose to his feet.

"Oh, sit down," she exclaimed quickly. "You like to see the hotel full and prosperous, Mr. Deegan?"

"Why, you bet I do," he answered, surprised at so unnecessary a question.

"Have you had it long?" she said, and began to ask him questions about it, its building, its first struggles, till Deegan quite forgot his ill-temper in his eager, loving story of his hotel's existence. If Mrs. West had been younger he might not have assumed her interest so easily; if she had been a man he would have feared ridicule; but to this elderly, sympathetic woman he found no difficulty in telling his past struggles, his future hopes, talking to her fully and freely as to his own soul, and she listened to him, speaking now and then an interested word till the approach of the time for supper forced them to separate.

Later in the evening she chanced to come across him

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and said abruptly, taking up the conversation where they had dropped it:

"But if the town does grow as you expect? If the branch line does start here for the coal-field?"

"Then it'll boom—just boom," he answered confidently, and putting down the bucket of water he was carrying to the stables, he began again to boast of the future prosperity of the town and of the hotel. In truth his hotel was very dear to Deegan; the chief, the only object of his affections; so that in a way he desired its prosperity even apart from the resulting benefit to himself. It had been his first personal enterprise, through it he had made for himself a place in the world that till then had always treated him as an outcast. Before he had been a homeless wanderer, going to and fro, separate from all the settled life he enviously watched from a place apart. With pride he had watched the slow growth of the district and the hotel, and in the future of both he had a strong and lively faith. His hotel was to him the passport to the respect of his fellows—its future prosperity the touch of colour and romance the lives of all men need. So he spoke in low, eager tones till Mrs. West interrupted him as he told her of his dearest and most secret hopes.

"That's all very well," she said; "but supposing John Leigh makes it a prohibition town? The Branch will go to Big Horn then without a doubt, and your hotel will be closed. Shut tight, town and hotel." She repeated the last phrase again. "Shut tight, town and hotel. It would be a pity, too," she added, and stole a swift glance at his face. It showed all the hate and anger she desired.

"They can't do it," he said gloomily.

"Oh, yes, they can," she answered. "if they get their

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own way. Are you sorry he was not—hurt this afternoon?"

He answered with an oath. "I wish Jim had killed him dead—him and his dad, too."

"Wishing will do nothing," she observed abstractedly.

"What do you mean?" he asked in a whisper.

She glanced up and saw his face very pale, with a drop of perspiration standing on his forehead.

"Why," she answered quickly, a little frightened at his expression that now had leaped before her thoughts, "wishing won't stop them, will it? You must conduct a campaign—do you call it?—like them."

"Oh," he said with deep relief. "Oh," he repeated with now apparent just the tiniest shade of disappointment.

"I don't want to lose a good place," observed Mrs. West. "I don't want to have to start out and begin wandering again—and I should be sorry, too, to see the place closed. Of course, a man doesn't mind making a fresh start, Mr. Deegan, but it's different for a woman; especially when one is getting old."

"I just won't close down," said Deegan, angrily. "And I'm not going to make a fresh start for a blame interferin' Britisher. It ain't reasonable. You said—"

—"that wishing wouldn't stop them," finished Mrs. West, briskly.

"No," agreed Deegan, "wishing won't, and that's a fact."

She saw the expression of his face, and she smiled, thinking he was at the point to which she had desired to bring him.

"No," she said; "but there might be ways and means. You told me, if you remember, how he ran away once when you offered him some whisky?"

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"Well?" he said, as she paused.

"It's that," she said, and then she began to whisper in his ear till on a sudden he burst into a boisterous peal of laughter.

"Hush! Hush!" she said with warning finger. "I shall want a jar of your strongest whisky."

"You shall have it," he cried. "Oh, you shall have it."

"And I'll go next Wednesday as the girl asked me."

"Lord! Lord!" he cried, leaning against a post for support while he shook with his laughter. "I'd give a hundred dollars to see him."

"It's only a chance," she reminded him. "He may not touch it."

"Only let him get a smell," he asserted, now more sanguine than herself, adopting her plan with eagerness—"one smell 'll do the trick."

"We'll see on Wednesday," she said and with a nod she disappeared. Quite forgetting his errand he walked round the hotel, looking up at it with affectionate glances and muttering, "No, old girl, they sha'n't close you down just yet a bit." At one place he actually patted the weather beaten boards with the manner of a man caressing his favourite horse and then again he murmured: "Don't you fret, old girl." He turned and walked towards the door. "It's a funny thing," he reflected as he went, "that a woman like her—with such a spirit and such a gift for cookin'—ain't got married again. Perhaps once was enough, but it's queer seein' they are most of 'em so almighty keen on it. Anyhow, it's a blame good job for this hotel she ain't." He pulled open the door. "A blame good job," he repeated as he went in, "though she's—she's—sort o' funny, too."

CHAPTER VII

ON the following Wednesday therefore Mrs. West drove out in a buggy to pay a visit to the Leigh farm. Deegan accompanied her part of the way till he brought her to a trail which led straight to her destination, so that there was no chance of her going astray. Then he left her and she drove on by herself, glad to be alone, that her mind might not be stayed from brooding on her wrongs and upon the biting scorn of the fate that had made her travel so far to offer her forgiveness where it was not even desired.

"But if he doesn't care about forgiveness, he shall have another thing; forgiving and forgetting go together and if he didn't want the one I sha'n't do the other;" she would murmur to herself at intervals; and always as she thus brooded on her wrongs her rage increased, feeding continually upon itself.

Her way took her through a country not in itself very pretty but to a stranger interesting enough, and now laughing at the first touch of spring; rejoicing almost visibly in the renewed strength of the sun that was fast unlocking the fierce long grip of the winter. The snow had all gone from the open prairie, though it still lay in patches in sheltered places. Each slough was now a little pond, reflecting back the rays of the sun, each ravine had turned into a little running stream, and a small river she had to pass on her way brimmed full with the melted

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snow. At every farm she passed the settler was busy, going quickly about his yard, anticipating gleefully the busy season, confident with the confidence of each recurring spring that this year's crop would be a good one, and inspecting closely the earth to see if yet it were dry enough to work.

But Mrs. West only noticed that the trail was muddy and hard-going, and her sombre looks relaxed not at all for any sign of the joyous spring time. Her wrong appeared to her so huge, so engrossed her mind with a sense of great bitterness, that it eclipsed in size even the unbounded prairies, equalled in interest even the vast activities of the coming spring. She passed moodily through this land that laughed to her, and planned only how she might strike back as bitter a blow as she had suffered.

At last she came in sight of a farm which from Deegan's description she recognized as her husband's. She drove past the outbuildings amid the barking of dogs, and Annie came running out to welcome her. Visitors were always something of a rarity and Annie valued them accordingly, but Mrs. West she welcomed with a quite separate pleasure.

"I am glad to see you," she said. "I was beginning to think you were never coming. It is such a long time."

"I have been so busy," answered Mrs. West; "but I have wanted to come for long enough to claim your promise."

"My promise," repeated Annie, not remembering for the moment; "but anyhow I am glad you have come at last."

"I see you have forgotten," laughed Mrs. West. "But you warned me things would be strange and that you would help me to get settled—"

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"Oh, yes, of course," said Annie, delighted at the prospect of helping any one. "Let us put the horse in first, and then we will go and have a nice talk."

Accordingly she unhitched the horse, while Mrs. West looked on at a feat far beyond her, and safely placed it in the stable with an armful of hay. Mrs. West watched her as she went about, tall and graceful, and she deliberately tried to increase the animosity she felt against her—interloper and child of an interloper.

"I don't care whether she is to blame herself or not," she muttered. "Her very presence here is an offence."

Going to the buggy she felt inside it among the rugs. Rather carefully she lifted out a brown paper parcel and showing it to Annie as she returned explained that it was for her father.

"Oh!" said Annie looking at it curiously. "Who is it from?"

"I don't know," answered Mrs. West. "I was asked to bring it by Mrs. McLean," she added, naming the postmaster's wife.

"But it has not been through the mail?"

"No, Mrs. McLean said some stranger had left it. Where shall I put it?"

"Oh, just leave it here," said Annie carelessly; "I'll take it in presently."

Apparently Mrs. West misunderstood her.

"On here?" she said, and moving forward she placed it on a little table just inside the open door of the kitchen. "It will be out of the way there, won't it?"

Annie had a momentary feeling of vexation, partly from fear that the kitchen might not be up to Mrs. West's standard of tidiness, but she did not say anything or inter-

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fere with the arrangement. They went together round to the front of the house and entered the sitting room.

Without a visible tremor Mrs. West entered again the home of the man from whom she had fled so many years before. She glanced round her, replying mechanically to Annie's remarks. The room itself was rather larger than is usual in western farm-houses; and much of the furniture had evidently come from England. Altogether the impression was one of comfort and good taste. Mrs. West took the seat Annie offered her; she had sat in it twenty years before, a happy bride. Opposite to her she saw a bookcase she remembered well; on the top was a small bronze statuette—it was her admiration that had made her husband buy it. In a corner she recognized his favourite chair with its peculiarly carved back and arms. Even the very pictures on the walls, hardly a strange one among them, were familiar to her and cried out to her of a lost happiness. It came to her that this was his room—his presence was stamped upon it—familiarily, intimately, it spoke to her of him she knew so well. She noticed how unusually low the pictures were hung—that had always been a fad of his, and it was extraordinary how that detail hurt her. Like the sear of hot iron came the remembrance of how he had brought another woman, the mother of this girl, and made her mistress of these things, of his life and of his heart. "His life was mine," she said to herself; "mine, for he gave it me, and yet he could put another woman in my place—and so soon." It was as though her soul shrivelled in the new agony of that thought; and there was no longer any trace of hesitation or remorse to mingle with her firm fixed purpose. Suddenly she found that Annie was expecting an answer to some question she had put.

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"Yes, yes," said Mrs. West hastily and at random; "I think so, at least."

"Oh, I'm so glad," cried Annie; "I shall tell father that;" and Mrs. West wondered what opinion she had committed herself to. With a smile that hid a consuming hatred, Mrs. West addressed herself to the conversation, and proved herself a charming companion. She asked many questions and Annie told her about the characteristics of the settlers and the country. Mrs. West exerted all her powers to please; she gained Annie's good will by the delicate flattery wherewith she accepted so readily advice and information about this new life and she retained the ascendancy due to her greater age by occasional remarks that showed her wider experience. Perhaps it is little wonder that the lonely and simple-minded girl fell an easy victim, and quickly felt for Mrs. West that enthusiastic admiration young girls do often entertain for older women who notice and are kind to them. Annie, too, had never known her mother and had found she possessed but little in common with most of her neighbours; and it was a pleasure as real as it was rare for her to talk with a woman who had seen something of the outside world.

"And you have really seen Venice?" she said once with awe in her tones. "Father has been there too, but he never cares to talk about it. Do tell me all about it and Rome, too. Oh, I should love to see Rome."

"Some other time," said Mrs. West and smiled as though she did not remember that that trip to Italy had been their wedding journey. She thought of how they had planned and hesitated over the cost, and how finally he had cried that go they should, since a honeymoon came but once in a lifetime. A sense of the horrid irony

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of the position came to Mrs. West and for a moment she felt as though she must cry out with the pain. But Annie's calm eyes were on her and she recovered her self-possession with an effort. She brought the conversation back to America, and then Annie exclaimed in dismay to see how late it was and rushed away to prepare tea.

Over this they seemed to grow even more friendly than before. Annie chatted with girlish frankness, telling her new acquaintance everything that came into her mind; and Mrs. West answered with a smiling urbanity that never for even a second slipped aside to show the burning rage beneath. But all through their careless chat, Mrs. West felt again fresh agony to see another holding sway in her husband's home, occupying the place that was hers by right, dispensing hospitality as she herself should have done. Now there was nothing left in her mind but a fixed determination. Yet it is curious that she never set herself any definite aim nor attempted to see clearly the end whereto she drifted. She simply felt that she hated with utter hatred the man who had married her only to injure her first and then to cast her off with unconcerned and added insult. And there are many who thus go from step to step till aghast they see the appointed end rise suddenly before them, inevitable and awful.

Although her mind was busy with hate and pain; with memories of what had been and with thoughts of what now was; still Mrs. West listened to Annie's talk, and said little sympathetic things, and drew her on to speak more intimately of herself. At last a name two or three times repeated caught her attention and she asked:

"This Mr. Briscoe you speak of; who is he?"

"Oh," said Annie volubly and busy with the teacups. "Just an Englishman, a neighbour, you can see his shanty,

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from one of the top windows. He often comes over to help father."

"A farmer, too, then?"

"Not exactly," said Annie, still busy with cups. "Do let me give you some more tea? He lives on O'Dell's place, but does not cultivate it, except just a few acres. He is only looking about him this year, I think—he had to leave England because of his health. Bristol is where he comes from at home."

"Oh," said Mrs. West watching her, and the hard mechanical smile she had worn all the afternoon became momentarily softer. "Did I not see him in the town that day—a rather handsome young fellow with nice curly hair?"

"Oh, yes," said Annie with almost pathetically apparent pleasure at the compliment. "So you did."

"And so he often comes across?"

"Oh, no; that is to say, yes, sometimes; just to help father, you know," explained Annie with increased confusion. "It is *such* a help to him to have some one like that," she added with emphasis.

Mrs. West glanced at her oddly, but the girl was looking down and saw nothing. "Judas," she whispered to herself, but added quickly: "It's only paying him with his own weapons." Leaning across with deliberation she kissed Annie on the cheek, patting her hand gently.

"Oh, please; Mrs. West," cried Annie and her confusion became painful.

"You see—" said Mrs. West; "I was young, once—and I know."

"Do you?" said Annie with surprise, for it had never

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before occurred to her that her experience might not be unique—and she had a vague idea that Mrs. West was really very old.

"Yes—" answered Mrs. West slowly. "I know—oh, yes; I know." Her smile was very bitter but Annie did not notice.

"Was he—was it—" she began and stopped, blushing furiously.

"He was very good and I was very happy," said Mrs. West and now it was Annie who kissed her. And Mrs. West felt the touch of her lips like the sting of white hot iron.

"But you are *quite* misunderstanding," she said a little lamely. "There is nothing, really, only—"

"Only he has looked—and you. Oh, yes; I understand," said Mrs. West, "tell me some more about him."

Annie had always been, both by nature and through the solitary circumstances of her life, very quiet and reserved; but now that that reserve had been captured she found it a relief to speak to this kind older woman, who seemed to understand her so well. She told with hesitation and many blushes the little there was to tell, and Mrs. West saw that Briscoe was probably only waiting some favourable opportunity to declare his love.

"He wanted me to go for a drive yesterday afternoon," Annie confided. "He was so cross when I wouldn't."

"And what will you say?"

"Oh, please," cried Annie in an agony.

"But you must make up your mind."

"I can't, I daren't," answered the girl. "I shall never let him say anything, never, never." She repeated the last

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word with decision. "Perhaps he won't try," she added hopefully.

Mrs. West laughed and said no more till presently it was time for her to go.

"But father will be in soon," said Annie; "won't you wait a little?"

"Will he?" said Mrs. West and appeared to hesitate, but she had no intention of meeting her husband just yet. "I am afraid I must go," she said with seeming reluctance.

Annie went to the stable and as no man was about harnessed the horse herself. Mrs. West drove away and as she watched her go, Annie realized with surprise how confidential their talk had been and how much she had told to this almost complete stranger. She felt ashamed of herself and thought that the older woman must certainly have despised her—had perhaps been secretly amused all the time.

"What did make me talk like that?" she exclaimed aloud. "How silly, how dreadfully silly."

With a very red face and a conviction that she had been foolish in the extreme, Annie turned towards the house. She felt terribly ashamed of herself for she did not in the least understand how she had been played upon and drawn out. Suddenly at a distance she saw Briscoe walking up the trail. After the late conversation this was altogether too much, and Annie promptly disappeared round the stable and away. So when Briscoe arrived he found an empty house and had to wait with what patience he might, while Annie, sorrowful and ashamed, walked sharply in another direction and wept a little and hoped she would never be so foolish again. She also decided that she did

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- not in the least care for Mr. Briscoe and that he most certainly did not in the very least care for her. She knew
- quite well that this was not true, but all the same she repeated it several times and pretended to believe it.

CHAPTER VIII

ANNIE did not return to the house till she saw her father coming up the trail with the load of wood he had been to fetch. Then she hurried back as fast as she could, suddenly remembering that nothing was ready for supper. Pausing but to give the briefest of greetings to Briscoe who was still patiently waiting for some one to appear, she darted into the kitchen and bustled about, hastily preparing the meal in some fear lest she might keep her father waiting.

Although never in her life had he even spoken harshly to her, yet Annie stood in considerable awe of her silent gloomy father. If she loved him, yet she feared him more, and on his side he never let her catch a glimpse of the gentle tender affections that lay behind his sombre manner. Indeed she was persuaded that he little more than tolerated her, and she believed that her girlish chatter often annoyed him though in truth he always welcomed it as one of the few things that had power to turn the gloomy current of his thoughts. But that she never dreamed and gradually had grown to be almost as silent as himself when in his presence. He knew that his persistent gloom must check her natural affection; he understood well enough that loving though the girl's disposition was, yet she grew each day to fear him more; but he felt himself powerless to prevent it. When she was younger he had tried once or twice to win her confidence but his change

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of manner only seemed to frighten her more. He quickly drifted back into the gloom that in her life had always characterized him, and again sought in persistent labour the only anodyne for his remembrances. Though he spent money on her education with an almost savage resolve to give her every advantage in his power, and with a prodigality that appalled Big End, there always existed between them in their home life a breach that neither his affection nor her sense of duty could bridge. And this was because she was to him not merely a dear and only child, but also the ever present witness of past sin.

Now from the window of the kitchen as she moved to and fro, she could see her father in the farm yard, going about the little evening chores before he came in for his supper. Briscoe had joined him and she could not help contrasting them—the slim active youth and the slow bent figure of the man. It had always seemed to Annie that in all essentials except years, even her grandfather was younger than his own son. The older man could laugh and joke on occasion, had hope and energy and something of the eager interests of youth; his son seemed to care for nothing except the spreading of the prohibitionist movement, and the heavy physical work in the fields wherewith he daily exhausted himself. She never remembered seeing him smile or otherwise than with bent head and sad eyes and slow dragging movements. She knew, too, that he was often awake at night in spite of the hard laborious work in which he spent the day.

Once, before the two old people had moved to a farm of their own at a distance of some miles, she had ventured to question her grandfather. "Is my father ill?" she had asked and he had told her "No." "Why does he never

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laugh or talk like you, then?" she had persisted and the old man had sighed as he answered: "He is not very happy; he broods too much." All that day he had been sad and silent, too, and Annie had never asked again; accepting this unvarying gloom of her father's as a settled part of life. It had become so familiar to her that the edge of her pity was dulled and now she thought little about it. It seemed quite natural to her when she heard Briscoe laugh merrily and looking out again, saw a young cow gambol absurdly in a sudden access of high spirits, that her father should merely be concerned to get it safely stalled. No incident however ludicrous, ever seemed to amuse him or even to interest him. Annie watched the little scene for a moment, and found the oddly shaped parcel that Mrs. West had left rather in her way. She had an intention to move it, but something diverted her, and she left it where it was.

"I must remember to tell father about it when he comes in, and I suppose Mr. Briscoe is sure to come, too, and stay for supper," she murmured as she put the finishing touches to the table. For the first time the idea of Briscoe's presence was unwelcome to her. Recollection of what she had confessed to Mrs. West still made her blush, and she did not at all wish to meet him again just then. It seemed to her that he must see what she had said recorded on her face. It was perhaps illogical but she felt distinctly angry with him and was prepared to be very cold and distant, and it was some satisfaction to her to decide with much emphasis that she would certainly say "No" if he did ask her any absurd ridiculous question. "In fact I won't let him speak to me—ever," she said aloud.

Looking through the window again she saw the two

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men walking together down the path to the house, and with a quick feeling of shyness she retreated to her bedroom. Briscoe went to wait in the front, while John Leigh himself stayed in the kitchen to get tidy. Life on the Leigh farm was different in many respects from the usual routine of the West; a fact that had always tended to keep them a little apart from their neighbours. Leigh kept up many of his English habits and prejudices and since Annie had come to womanhood he had grown even more particular. Lately he had put up a separate house for the hired help, and though that had been a source of much heart burning at first, he now employed a married couple who were well satisfied with the arrangement. This woman, too, took all the heavier work off Annie's shoulders and she boarded the additional men who were employed during the busy times.

Some casual remark that Briscoe had made about England had set Leigh's thoughts that never wholly left the past, brooding upon it even more bitterly than usual. Mrs. West's package chanced to be in his way and he moved it without noticing that it bore his name. As he tidied himself—he was the only farmer in the district, and probably in the whole of North America, who regularly put on collar and tie at supper time—his melancholy increased. He was not more tired than usual, but he seemed to have less strength to endure his gloomy thoughts. He remembered Briscoe's merry laughter at the frisky cow, when Annie had thought him solely concerned to see the animal stabled, and a keen envy of all young and unspoilt lives swept over him. He wondered—not for the first time—whether it was worth while, whether anything was worth while.

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"If I could only forget sometimes," he said; "if only for just one day I could be like other men, I think I could bear it better."

The old legend of how Judas Iscariot is given one day of respite in each year of his damnation, came to him; and he wondered whether he would suffer as much in the next world as he had in this.

"Oh, I know I deserved it," he said aloud; "but still even one day like Judas, would be something to be grateful for."

His eye chanced to fall just then upon the label tied to the package he had moved the moment before. He finished tidying himself and then without much interest cut the string.

"A bottle," he said, and pulled out the cork.

A strong pungent smell rose to his nostrils. He stood like one petrified.

"Whisky," he whispered, and he glanced about and behind as though he feared detection. He rounded his shoulders and bent his body over the bottle almost as though to hide it. "I must—I must throw it away," he said, "all away—at once."

Presently he put out one hand, and then quickly drew it back. His nostrils twitched with eagerness and opened to catch up the full strength of the odour. His lips suddenly went dry, and he tried to moisten them with a tongue as dry. He almost choked. It occurred to him that he was thirsty. His right hand swung to and fro like a pendulum—he trembled with the violence of his desire; and yet was aware of unformed memories that held him back.

"Only a little," he said. "Why not? Just a drop—before I throw the rest away."

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Suddenly he found that he held a teacup in his hand. He looked at it with surprise, then let it fall and watched stupidly the white fragments scatter on the floor. Even as he looked his hand went behind him, groping on a shelf. He made no attempt to see but presently it came forward again and now it held a tin pannikin.

"God help me," he groaned and putting up his other hand he wiped the perspiration from his forehead. He began to talk to himself in a rapid voluble whisper. "Why not?" he said. "Twenty years of suffering—of agony—of memory—never forgetting for one moment—this would give me forgetfulness to-night—and happiness. Not too much, of course—but in moderation—in reason." These last two words caught his fancy and he kept repeating them to himself. "In reason," he said and again "in reason—just a little—in reason. And *that* for to-morrow," he said finally and snapped his fingers in the air.

Taking a spoonful of sugar he put it in the pannikin he held. He was very particular to get the right amount, twice adding a few grains and once taking some away. The kettle was boiling on the stove. He went quickly towards it muttering to himself: "In reason—not yielding or giving way suddenly—in reason." Somehow it appeared to him that if he performed all his actions slowly and in the regular manner, he would prove that he was not giving way to any sudden temptation: in a vague fashion the formality of his actions presented itself to him as an excuse. He took hold of the handle of the kettle but it chanced to be hot and burned him. He let go quickly and looked round with a surprised air, as though not quite understanding. His eye fell upon the bottle and he saw the whisky it held. His whole being shook with desire

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for the spirit ; his body, his throat, his mouth, yearned for the fiery taste. It was as though he burned internally.

"And to forget," he said, and with one leap he went across the floor ; his eyes fierce, his hand outstretched. He seized the bottle and swung it up ; he put his head back ; his mouth gaped ; he paused for just one second to anticipate the long luxurious draught.

"Are you ready yet, father?" said Annie from the inner room.

He heard and stayed himself. With all his force he hurled the bottle from him, so that it flew through the open door and smashed to little pieces against a fence post. The whisky soaked into the earth. John Leigh half fell against the door, shaking in every limb, and hearing the noise Annie ran into the room fearing for her crockery.

"Oh, dear," she said as she stood in the doorway, "what is it?" She glanced round and saw the fragments on the floor. "One of the cups," she said, "Is that all? I thought—Why, father, what is the matter?"

He did not answer her. She repeated the question and then as he still did not seem to hear, she touched his arm. Instantly he bounded away as though she had pricked him and she gave a startled cry.

"What is the matter?" she asked, looking at him in astonishment and distress ; for his face was white, his limbs shook, his mouth hung open and he seemed not to understand. "Father," she repeated, "are you ill? Shall I get you anything?"

He caught her arm as she approached him. He dragged her outside and pointed, and his grasp on her arm tightened till it hurt her. "Look," he said wildly ; "it has all gone, how quickly it has swallowed it up, how thirsty it

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must have been. Like—like—” his voice sank to a whisper—“like me,” he said.

Annie went a little pale for he frightened her, and his grasp on her arm was quite painful; but her eyes rested steadily and gently on his and she did her best to hide her terror.

“What is it, father?” she asked softly. Strangely she felt more drawn to him than ever before. She even ventured on a term of endearment. “Dear father, tell me.”

But still he did not speak, and for a few moments they stood thus. She saw how ghastly white he was, and how in his usually quiet and melancholy eyes there burned a strange fire. Still she did not flinch or heed the pain where his hand crushed her arm. Slowly the wild excitement died away from his face and left him sad and immobile as before.

“Supper is ready?” he asked. “Yes, then let us go.”

CHAPTER IX

FOR the rest of that evening John Leigh remained even more silent and gloomy than usual. Annie, too, was very quiet and on a plea of headache retired early to her own room; so that it was not long before Briscoe went back to his own shanty, in, it is to be feared, not the most amiable of tempers. Annie did not appear again that night, though she watched Briscoe's departure from the corner of her window, so that nothing was said about her visitor. Early the next morning, however, as he came in from milking, her father suddenly began to question her. He listened in silence to her description until she mentioned that the stranger seemed to have had one eye badly hurt at some time. Thrice he made Annie repeat this, pressing her for a more detailed description till at last she cried out with some petulance that she could tell him nothing more.

"Nothing more?" he said and abruptly he left the room.

"What is the matter?" she said aloud as she saw him go. She went to the window and from it, saw him lead a horse out of the stable, leap on it bare-backed, and gallop furiously away towards the town. "And he has had no breakfast," said Annie; "not a bite."

She was expecting her grandfather, old Mr. Leigh, that morning, he having sent word that he would be over early on his way to a neighbour's. Almost immediately she saw him coming and ran out to greet him. She felt very puz-

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zled and a little frightened, and very excitedly she told him the whole story.

"Now, grandpa," she said; "what does it all mean?"

"My dear," he answered in much distress and then paused. Long ago he had promised to keep from Annie the secret of the doubtful legitimacy of her birth. At first he had wished to keep the secret for his son's own sake; but lately he had come to recognize that the discovery of the truth would hurt Annie much more. He knew that she was proud of what she had always considered her father's stern uprightness, and that round the figure of that dead mother she had never known, had clustered all her tenderest dreams, all the unchecked love and reverence of a young girl's heart. He glanced at her with apprehension, fearing the effect of the discovery, knowing the passionate intensity of her feelings. "She has keen ideas of honour," he said to himself. "How will she take knowing such a thing of her parents?" But though this news of Annie's confirmed the stray apprehension that had brought him over this morning, he was not certain that the stranger was really his son's injured wife returned again. He was too bewildered to think clearly. "It is a debt," he said finally, as she still waited his reply.

"Oh," said Annie, and drew a long breath of deep relief. "Is that all? Oh, you will laugh, grandpa, but I was so frightened."

He looked at her uneasily and his tone was gruff as he asked shortly: "Frightened? Nonsense. Why?"

"Oh, I don't know, but I was. It was silly—but—oh, dreadful things, vague things, things I did not under-

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stand. But a debt, why! that is nothing." And Annie smiled and waved her hand in happy contempt for all such trifles.

"But it is a big debt, a heavy debt," answered the old man slowly. "I thought it was paid, but God is a jealous God—a jealous God," he repeated "to the uttermost farthing."

"But surely it cannot be much," objected Annie. "Father is always so particular and careful."

"He thought this was cleared," said the old man. "I thought so, too; but it is not."

"Is that why he went off so quickly? He might have waited for breakfast. Is it very much? Does he owe it to Mrs. West? And who is she?"

"We knew her at home. He owes her very much—more than he can ever pay, I fear."

"Poor father," said Annie; "we shall have to be more careful, then. How much is it, do you know?"

"A great deal—a very great deal."

"It was very nice of her not to say anything," said Annie approvingly. "I suppose she just came so that he could pay if he liked. And father was taken by surprise—that is why he was so funny last night."

"Perhaps—I suppose so," said Mr. Leigh hesitatingly.

They went in together to get their delayed breakfast. Annie chattered on, evolving for herself a theory of money generously lent in the past and now to be immediately repaid. She felt equally pleased with Mrs. West's behaviour in making no direct demand for the money, and with her father for his anxiety to pay his debts. Opposite to her the old man sat silently, making pretence to eat, and thinking—thinking.

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"But why did she come?" he said to himself over and over again. "To forgive or—to forgive or—"

And Annie, who usually had cream with her breakfast, this morning took only the skim milk, putting aside the cream with care that there might be the more butter. "Butter always fetches its price," she said wisely, repeating what the manager of the local creamery was fond of impressing on the settlers. Already she saw the money she supposed to be owing to Mrs. West completely cleared off, and imagined her father thanking her for her assistance. She thought that would be very nice.

Meanwhile John Leigh galloped on to town and all the morning he hung about there—conduct so unusual with him that several men inquired what was wrong. At dinner time he hovered near the hotel, longing to enter but not daring. He had heard a certain amount of gossip about the new cook and housekeeper at Deegan's; and he had heard among other things that she almost always went for a walk in the afternoon, the time between dinner and supper affording her best opportunity. For this he waited, determined to speak to her alone—he felt, that if his suspicions proved correct, he would desire no others to be present. So he waited; and now the time seemed to him very long, each minute like a summer's day; and now it seemed too short, hurrying him on with unfair speed.

"I know it is she," he said, and he was surprised to find how his heart beat. "But why the whisky? A trial—or to ruin me again?"

He waited till at last he saw her come from the hotel and walk swiftly past where he sat, hidden in a machine shed. He watched her go and then followed, and though he had not seen the face plainly yet he knew the figure and

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the walk. His heart leaped within him as he saw ; he felt that whatever the issue it was good to see her again, a boon for which he had not dared to hope ; and as he followed her he murmured to himself in a constant whisper :

"To test me—or to ruin me?"

At first, while she was still within sight of the settlement he did not attempt to overtake her. Before long the trail led through a fairly large bluff of poplars, hiding them from the village. Then he quickened his pace, and she, hearing his eager footsteps, turned and faced him, knowing him as instantly as he had known her.

"Connie," he said and his voice broke. "Oh, Connie," he repeated, "Connie, Connie."

She looked at him with hungry eyes and as she looked she knew how greatly she still loved him. She had an impulse to throw herself on his breast, forgetting all her wrongs. In imagination she felt again, as vividly as though no gap of twenty years existed, his dear familiar arms tighten about her, pressing her closely to him. If he had made but one movement, so it would have befallen ; but he stood a little way distant with bent head and did not speak again. Still she devoured his appearance with eager looks and she noted every change. She had lost a young and handsome man full of boisterous life and spirits, she found one sad and careworn, marked by long suffering. She longed to comfort him, and her heart yearned so towards him that she felt the need of doing something to hold the anger that was slipping away from her so fast. She put up her hand and touched her blind eye, and the scar that ran from it down to the cheek bone. He saw the movement and shrank away with a little moan.

"How you must hate me," he said.

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"I do," she asserted vehemently. "I hate you—oh, how I hate you." Within her, fierce hate and love as fierce so strove together, so mingled one with the other, that she knew not which was conqueror. "I hate you; yes, I hate and detest you as I have cause," she cried out loudly; but had he taken her and kissed her how glad she would have been.

Instead he sighed and dug at the ground with the toe of his boot.

"You have cause enough, I know," he said, and then abruptly: "Why did you bring that whisky?"

"Because I hate you so."

"Did you wish to—to see me like *that* again?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Oh, Connie," he said in a whisper, but she heard. For that moment love conquered hate; she made a little movement towards him; in another second she would have been in his arms, forgiving and forgiven. Then he spoke again and the words he said were bitter to her—bitter as the memory of the past. "It was very nearly," he said, "It was at my lips and if I had drunk I should have gone mad; but Annie called and I flung it away when I heard her."

"How touching," sneered Mrs. West, and the twin memories of the two wrongs he had done her came back so that all her emotion froze, crystalizing into bitterest hate because it was she who had tempted him and another woman who had saved him.

"It would have been my utter ruin," he said. "Did you really wish that?" There was a note of appeal in his voice but she made no reply and he went on: "I have not tasted liquor since—not for many years. Immediately after-

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wards, I was mad, I think. I tried to drink myself to death. But my father saved me from that—because he showed me it was more bitter to live.”

“It would have been a fitting death for you,” she answered; “why did he interfere?”

He looked at her with some wonder at her bitterness; but put aside the thought, saying to himself his actions had given her cause enough. “At first I hoped you had brought the whisky as a trial—a test,” he said presently; “that perhaps you meant you might forgive some day if I conquered the desire?”

“Did you?” she answered scornfully, with increased anger. “I came because I hated you—because—” she threw wide her arms with a passionate gesture—“because I could not live without revenge.”

“Revenge,” he said with wonder in his voice. “Have you not had enough—these twenty years?”

“No,” she answered; “and I am hungry for it.”

“What do you want, then?”

“To ruin you.”

“Ruin? I will not take to drink again—even for you. But anything else you desire I will do—it is your right.”

“Oh, right,” she said with infinite scorn. “You have left me no rights.”

“You shall have every penny I possess if that is what you want.”

“It is like you,” she answered sneering; “to think a few pounds will wipe out what you did.”

“My death, then?” he said and his eyes were very weary. “I swore to my father that I would never seek it—but I have longed for it—yes, I have longed for it—every day since.”

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"Every day," she repeated with bitter emphasis and she held him for a hypocrite. "And Annie?" she asked.

He went very pale. "I was mad," he said. "Mad and bad and wicked. For six months I was never sober. But what I did I did; and it cannot be undone. It was not Annie's fault, poor child. God knows I repent; and, Constance, anything you desire as proof, I will do."

"Treat this brat as you treated me."

"Of course you do not mean that," he said.

"Do you love her?"

"She is my daughter—she has claims upon me—I cannot deny them—even for you."

"Oh," she cried in sudden rage; "to see you really suffer—instead of all these words."

"Suffer?" he said and again there was a note of wonder in his voice. "I have suffered—I do not think you can make me suffer more."

"I will try," she said and her look and her tone were bitter; bitter as hate, child of sin and death. "Oh," she cried, "I will find a way."

"There is nothing that can hurt me more than the memory of what I did that day," he said slowly; "and of how I lived the time following. Can you not understand? It is living hell," he burst out when she did not answer; "it is worse than any flames."

"You shall feel the flames, too," she said with a malign look. "There is Annie."

"But you would not hurt her?" he said in puzzled tones, and then he thought he understood. "You will tell her everything?"

"I will make you suffer through her."

"Yes," he said thoughtfully; "you are right. It will be

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bad to see what I did—my sin—ruin her life, too. And she will despise me so; that will hurt a little. Yes, you are right, Connie, and I should not complain. Only it's hard on the child."

"You think of her and not of me," cried Mrs. West with a fresh jealousy.

"Why," he said, trying to understand. "But—oh, well, you have a right to do what you will. You shall tell her if you wish, I will not try to prevent you. It will be another life ruined, I expect, and through me. But, Connie, will you not at least believe that I am sorry for what I did, that I have repented it ever since, that I have hardly known a happy hour since? Connie, if you—"

She did not seem to hear him and without waiting till he had finished began to walk back to the town. Suddenly she turned.

"Liar and hypocrite," she said, as though she threw the words in his face, and with that went quickly on her way.

She hardly spoke again till the evening when she and Pierre, the little dish-washer were busy together in the kitchen, and he chanced to say something to her in which she only caught the word "forgive."

"Forgive!" she cried. "Why, not even an angel could forgive such things."

"But, Madame," protested Pierre in bewilderment; "it is only a broken pie-crust."

"Oh," she said and came and looked at it, long and steadily, while Pierre watched her in growing amazement. "Oh, yes," she said, "one can forgive that. Because, you see, Pierre, pie-crusts are made to be broken."

CHAPTER X

ONE evening, a little later on, Deegan stood at the door of his hotel in the happiest of happy moods, pleased with himself, his supper, and his affairs in general, when he saw his rival, Cameron, approaching; and then his deep content grew deeper yet. That day had seen one, George Hope, a hitherto consistent patron of Cameron's, enticed to Deegan's hotel by the new fame of its pies.

"Evening, Cameron," observed Deegan genially. "Say," he added, "have you seen Georgie Hope around anywhere? I wanted to ask him somethin'."

Cameron stopped and scowled in recognition of the insult. For a moment he hesitated on the point of open warfare and then decided to return taunt for taunt. He faced Deegan squarely and flung at him words that scattered his smiling content as a stone, well aimed, scatters feeding birds.

"Is it true about Mrs. West and John Leigh?" he asked.

For answer Deegan swore angrily. "It's the worst kind of a lie," he declared and then asked: "What is it, anyway?" for with all his brave denial he was uneasy, remembering that Mrs. West had seemed interested in the Leighs and had flatly refused to talk about her late visit to them.

"Oh, I don't know," answered Cameron, keenly conscious of the other's dismay. "Likely enough it is all lies,

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only I did hear things was all fixed up. I was told as John Leigh was hangin' around town all one mornin' and was talkin' to her all afternoon. 'Course, I don't know—only young Buckly he let on in my place as he saw 'em together out there."

"Young Buckly is an awful liar," said Deegan, but without conviction.

"That's so," agreed Cameron. "Then she didn't go there visitin' the other day?"

"Oh, you get," said Deegan and retreated inside the hotel.

Just behind the dining room, was a little apartment he called his office and there he retired, vastly disturbed, to think things out; occasionally in an abstracted manner swearing softly to himself.

"It's so," he said finally, speaking his thoughts aloud to arrange them more clearly, as is often the custom of men unused to any conscious effort of continued meditation. "He's got round her—there ain't no doubt of it. Reckon likely she was foolin' me all along and that was what she was after, doggone her. I might have guessed it, her story was so almighty thin; a body with a grain of horse-sense would have known it was a put up job. Tryin' to hocus a man with good whisky; why! any ordinary fool would have known more'n to believe that. She just wanted to get on his right side, likely; though I don't quite see all her game yet. Still, it's clear most of it. She comes askin' about 'em; she makes an excuse to go there; the very next day he comes to town and hangs round to see her. Then she's a widow and a plum-dandy at cookin', and he's a widower an' the best fixed man in the county—not the shadow of a mortgage on the tail of one of his

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cows. So I reckon I'd better get out and hustle—see the thing through right away.”

He got up with an air of determination, walked quickly to the door and then paused and shook his head slowly.

“It’s just an awful risk,” he said; “an’ me so used to batchin’. Maybe I’d better try an’ hire another cook and just let this slide. But then I’ll save wages on the deal.” This thought quite restored his decision and he opened the door briskly. “But I do hope,” he muttered as he went out, “that she ain’t one of ’em that talks at night.”

The yard of the hotel was quite deserted, and with the manner of a man determined to waste no time in disposing of a necessary but rather irksome task, he walked straight on. The stable stood just across the yard and behind it was a piece of land held by building speculators; virgin prairie that stretched away, untouched by man, to the unknown North. Here as Deegan knew, Mrs. West often came before retiring for the night, and here accordingly he now found her; to his surprise not sitting quietly but pacing restlessly to and fro.

She did not see him at first, absorbed in some strong emotion that urged her to find relief in movement. Deegan watched her for a little and then stepping forward stumbled over some harrows, upsetting them with a crash. Mrs. West sprang aside with a little startled cry, and then she saw who it was and grew angry.

“What do you come here for?” she asked. “What do you want?”

Deegan sat where he was on the ground and looked up at her. With this small white faced woman standing over him, dimly seen in the darkness, the proposition he had come to make no longer seemed quite so natural or so

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simple. He was conscious of an unexpected awkwardness. He found refuge in rubbing his shins and declaring he had lost a square foot of skin.

"What do you want?" asked Mrs. West sharply, cutting short his lamentations. "Didn't you know I was here?"

"Yes'm," said Deegan meekly. "That's why I come."

"Then what do you mean by such impertinence?" demanded Mrs. West and all the tumult of her varying emotions thrilled in the anger that was in her voice.

"There ain't no call to get mad about it," he complained. "I only came to say as you an' me had better get hitched."

"Get what?" she asked.

"Hitched. Be partners, you know; get married."

"Married," she repeated, catching at the word she understood and her anger giving way to wonder. "But who?"

"Why, you an' me, of course. I'll fix everythin' just as soon as you like. May as well get it over."

"What do you mean?" she asked. "Have you been drinking?" she added as a possible explanation occurred to her.

"No," he said indignantly; "I have not been drinking and, as an American citizen, I hope I know better what is due to a lady than to suggest hitchin' while drunk. No, ma'am, I am not drunk."

"Then you're a fool," said Mrs. West and resumed her restless pacing to and fro.

"Meanin'," said Deegan; "meanin', I suppose, that you don't want to chip in?"

"Oh, go away," answered Mrs. West impatiently.

"Well, that beats all," said Deegan and moved to go.

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Suddenly he stopped, came back again, and called: "Mrs. West, ma'am."

"Well?" she said.

"I don't think, ma'am, that you quite caught on," he said slowly; "you bein' a Britisher naturally ain't quick at catchin' on. But what I mean is hitchin' right an' tight, so as you would be boss, after me, of course, and run things to suit yourself. It's a good hotel."

Mrs. West made no answer, and Deegan added after a pause:

"And I don't mind lettin' you know as there's a thousand dollar mortgage on Wright's, not to mention ten shares in the mill and three in the creamery. In all of which you would be a partner, ma'am, and the hotel ain't doin' so bad."

"Oh," said Mrs. West, "why don't you go away instead of babbling there?"

"I said hitchin' and hitchin' I meant," replied Deegan in deep offence, "but when it comes to babblin' I quit right away; seein' I'm as sober as a new born babe."

With this he walked off, muttering angrily to himself.

"I reckon," he said as he went into the bar for the drink he thought he quite deserved; "I reckon it's an escape—you never know how a woman will shape when she takes hold. Oh, it's a real escape for me, that's a sure thing, an' I'm mighty thankful, I am."

None the less he watched the hotel yard closely, and when later on he saw Mrs. West walking across it he slipped out and confronted her.

"Is it John Leigh?" he asked abruptly.

"Really," she answered, half puzzled, half angry; "you

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are behaving very strangely, Mr. Deegan. What do you mean?"

"Because," he continued, following his own line of thought, "if it is, there's goin' to be trouble—bad trouble."

"Trouble," she repeated. "Oh, trouble enough."

"It is Leigh, then?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm talkin', ain't I? Are you goin' to marry John Leigh?"

"Oh," she said, "is that it? No, it is quite certain I shall never do that—never."

"That's all right, then," said Deegan heartily and then added: "What about me?"

"Really," she said; "it is too absurd. Do you want me to go?"

"Tain't likely when I'm sayin' hitch all the time, is it? Why do you reckon I want to hitch except to stop you from quittin', and me havin' all the trouble of gettin' a new cook?"

"I have no intention of leaving at present. Does that satisfy you?"

"You'll be like all the rest of 'em," said Deegan gloomily; "you'll slip off some day and send a note to say you're hitched and will I send your baggage on. I give you warnin'—I'll kick any man that brings that message twice round the yard."

"Will you?" said Mrs. West, laughing in spite of herself.

"I will so. Well, I'm sorry you don't see your way to chip in for it strikes me as a good sound business arrangement. Of course, it's your say, but it do seem surprisin'—an' mind I won't have that Leigh interferin'."

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"Why not?"

"I hate 'em worse nor poison," he answered.

"So do I." She tried to control her voice but the words cried their message of stinging rage through the hissing emphasis she gave them. "Oh, so do I," she said again.

"Don't fret," said Deegan rather bewildered at her tone. "Maybe you'll find a chance to get even with him some day."

"Yes," she answered sombrely; "some day," and she slipped past him into the house.

He looked after her, for some time, standing where she had left him.

"She's a mighty queer woman," he said to himself. "I never struck another like her. It's most surprisin' her turnin' me down like that. A mighty nice woman, too, when she ain't mad; and, Lord, then she looks real fine. I reckon, maybe, it ain't so much of an escape after all. She would make a dandy fine wife and double the business of the hotel, too. Say, Tom Deegan, if you had the hotel boomin' like it would, and her to boss around and see to things; why, you wouldn't want to call a N' York millionaire your uncle." He tried to dismiss the alluring thought but it would not go. "It's most almighty queer," he muttered; "but I do believe I'm sorry she declined even though she said she was stayin'. Sure as shootin' I do believe I'd rather have her for a wife than for a cook—but, of course, that might be on account of the wages."

This last reflection consoled him a little, restoring to him his favourable opinion of his business instincts. He was walking back towards the stable to see that all was right for the night when he felt a light touch on his arm and turning saw Mrs. West again by his side,

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"Is that Mr. Briscoe in the bar?" she asked in a low eager whisper.

"Eh? Briscoe? Is he there? The young fool; I told him to go home an hour ago."

"Does he—?" Her grasp tightened on his arm, and he felt her touch with strange emotion. "Does he—? Does he—drink?"

"You couldn't call it drinkin'," said Deegan impartially. "Only if he gets with the boys, he's apt to get a jag on. No, he don't drink, so to say, but he can't stand even a little bit—goes to his head right away. It's a sort of natural weakness," concluded Deegan with sympathy, "so he ought to keep clear of it altogether."

"I see," said Mrs. West. "Does he often?"

"Oh, no; only once in a while. Only he gets excited so blame quick, he didn't ought to touch it at all."

"I heard," said Mrs. West abruptly; "that he was much with Annie Leigh."

"That's so," said Deegan. "Reckon he's courtin'. Some one ought to tell her. But he'd be all right if he was taken in hand."

Suddenly Mrs. West caught his open coat with both hands. She shook him with all her strength and spoke intensely.

"Do you hate him?" she said. "I do. I love him—Oh, how I hate him."

"Who? Leigh?" he asked a little bewildered. "You bet, I'm layin' for him all the time—the first show I get—you'll see."

"Do you—will you help?"

He looked down at her and he was suddenly afraid; and it seemed most strange to him that he should be

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afraid before this small and slender woman whom he could have crushed with one movement. He did not answer her. His heavy body hardly felt her feeble strength though she shook him with all her might, but gradually his dull soul lighted, answering to the fire of her intent words.

"Hate," she said in clear whispers. "Hate—hate—hate him."

"Yes," he said and swore by sacred things. "I'll help." He touched her on the breast and then himself. "Partners," he said; "you and me."

"Partners," she repeated; "you and me. Go and give Briscoe all the drink he wants."

"Right," he said. "I'll fill him—full."

He went swiftly and as she saw him go she laughed—low and gently, and stopped with shudders.

CHAPTER XI

I RECKON," said Deegan thoughtfully as the next morning he surveyed his chin in the broken square of mirror that adorned his bedroom wall; "I reckon I had better shave though it 'do seem ridiculous seein' I done it only last week—but she told Pierre he was a fair disgrace and she went for Joe Wright, too."

He sat down on the edge of his bed and stropped his razor, but slowly and with an air of deliberation that seemed to hint a mind occupied with some grave problem. However he completed the operation in silence and then again lost himself in thought, staring intently at his reflection in the broken mirror. At last he spoke aloud.

"It's a mean low down trick," he said; and I won't have anything more to do with it. That boy didn't want to get drunk, and he wouldn't have got drunk, neither, only for me. He was awful bad, too, and he'll feel awful bad about it this morning. No, I'll quit; though Mrs. West does look at you so—so queer like—as though you just got to. But the girl never harmed me nor young Briscoe, neither, it's her pa I'm after, not her, and so I'll tell Mrs. West right away—at least—well, right after breakfast."

Filled with this determination he went downstairs and pursued the ordinary duties of the morning, taking care however to be as seldom as possible near Mrs. West, whom

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none the less he watched from a distance intently enough. After breakfast he found an errand that would necessitate a long drive into the country and instantly it appeared to him that this required immediate attention, that he must set off that very hour, and that therefore the interview with Mrs. West must be postponed. He went outside to make arrangements and had just returned when suddenly Mrs. West came so quickly into the room that he had no opportunity of avoiding the meeting he secretly dreaded. The remorse of the lad whom he had persuaded to his fall the night before had really affected him, but though he had determined to have no more to do with Mrs. West's schemes, he did not anticipate with pleasure the task of explaining this to her.

"How is Briscoe?" she asked.

"Bad," said Deegan, "awful bad, says he ain't fit to live, says he'll cut his throat. Oh, he's feelin' real mean about it." He felt a renewed pity for his victim, an increased determination to be done with such things, and he added abruptly, "See here, I wanted to speak to you."

She looked up at him very steadily and waited in disconcerting silence.

"See now," he said and thumped the table that the noise might increase his ebbing courage; "I won't have it—you hear me?"

"Have you had bad dreams?" she asked, looking at him with curiosity.

"Awful," he said with a shudder: "How did you know?"

"Dreams do not matter," she answered slowly. "It is the awakening that hurts."

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"I don't know what you're gettin' at—and I wish you wouldn't stare at me like that—like you saw horrors."

"I am sorry," she said and walking to the window she remained looking from it while Deegan fidgeted by the table. Presently she spoke.

"I make you a fair offer," she said. "Drive me down to the railway and I will take the next train and you shall never see me again."

Still she did not look round, but she waited eagerly for his reply—with parted lips, scarce breathing—not knowing what she desired but conscious how much depended on his words and determined to abide by them. She had an odd feeling that she was no longer responsible, that she had thrown the burden of the decision upon Fate; like a gambler who has staked his all, she waited.

"Now you're mad," said Deegan slowly. He had a vision of the hotel without her; bare and desolate, and again ill-cooked slovenly meals. "I did not mean to offend you, ma'am; and as for driving you to the depot—not much if I can help it."

"Very well," she answered with a deep sigh. "It is the will of God," she said to herself, and shrank not from the blasphemy. She moved across and sat down at the table opposite to Deegan and smiled at him who still fidgeted and moved uneasily till half reluctantly he smiled back. "Now let us understand each other," she said; "you hate John Leigh because you know he means to make this town prohibition and that means—"

"The restaurant will pay," he answered, "if you stop. The boys like your way of cookin' and servin' up things first rate."

"But Cameron's is popular, too; and there is not room

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for two dining places in the town. If it is prohibition, one of you will have to go; and unless I stay it is just as certain that one will be you."

"There's the mortgage," he said sulkily; "and the shares."

"Wright can't even pay the interest this year, you know that. As for the mill, there is likely to be a fresh call this fall I'm told, and as for the creamery, you couldn't sell a share for five dollars cash."

"Well—supposin'—what are you rubbin' it in for, anyway?"

"I wish you to see clearly where you stand. If prohibition is brought in, it's—"

"Ruin," said Deegan. "Oh, I know and I've stopped awake thinkin' of it. Curse that Leigh—I think—"

"You think—what?" said Mrs. West.

"I could shoot him," said Deegan and his white face looked dangerous.

She laughed across the table—a bitter sneering laugh.

"Bravo," said she. "And then—?"

"I don't know. But he'd be dead, anyway."

"Oh, you foolish fellow, that would be no good. You would have to run away or stand trial. It would mean hanging."

"They are certainly almighty particular on this side," agreed Deegan gloomily.

"Even if you escaped that, it would mean gaol for a long term, and what would happen to the hotel then?"

"That's true," he said and then cried out: "What shall I do then?"

"Besides, the murder of a prohibitionist by a saloon-keeper would double their voting strength and put all

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sympathy on their side—the 'blood of the martyrs,' you know," and again she laughed sneeringly.

"I don't see no joke," he complained. "This thing means a lot to me."

"Does it? What?"

"Trampin'—turnin' hobo—a haymow and a handout for the rest of my life. I started a tramp—my pa and ma were tramps, I reckon—I was one till I got a job cleaning stables at Pottsville. It was all so strange, getting your grub as a right and having a place where you belonged, that I just cottoned to it. I just did; and there wasn't a cleaner stable in all the States than mine; no, nor a harder man on tramps—I despised 'em so. And I worked for all I was worth. Then I come here and set up this opposition show to Cameron's. It ain't done so terrible bad and I've worked early and late, ma'am; why, there ain't a nail on the place I ain't drove, nor a piece of wood I don't know—and love. There ain't a better respected saloonkeeper in the county—there ain't a better fixed hotel—painted inside and out every year. Ma'am, if God made the world, I made this hotel—and I just love it—and if I have to close down I'll go back to trampin' for I shan't be fit for nothin' else—and shan't want to be, neither."

He put down his head, resting it on his hands, and she saw that he had difficulty to repress a sob. At another time she would have pitied him, but now she was glad.

"That's why you wouldn't hitch, I reckon," he said presently. "It's the first time I ever faced the thing squarely, and I shouldn't now only you seemed to put it all so clear. I just seemed to see it. The hotel shut down, and the bare road, and the brakesmen peltin' you from

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the trains, and the dogs barkin' at you at the farms, and the deputies givin' you an hour to be clear of the towns, and the very children shoutin' after you—and not one place where you belong."

"Yes," said Mrs. West slowly; "yes, it will come to that without a doubt. Unless—"

"Unless—Oh, ma'am, is there a way out?"

"Of course."

"Tell it me—" he spoke fiercely. "I can't see nothin' myself, but the shut hotel and the long roads with me trampin' on 'em."

"But just now you said you would have nothing more to do with it? That it was a mean trick."

"I don't give a cent how mean it is," he answered. "Not now."

"To save your hotel you must defeat the prohibitionist movement. The easiest way to defeat a movement is to ruin the leader—John Leigh. Or he will ruin you."

"That's fair enough," said Deegan; "he begun it."

"My plan is simple. Briscoe drinks, and we can help him to marry Annie Leigh. It will ruin her father as a prohibitionist to have his son-in-law a customer of yours and on your side."

"But," said Deegan doubtfully; "do you reckon that'll work? And it's a trifle rough on the girl, you know."

"To help her to a good marriage," said Mrs. West with an appearance of surprise. "A man is no worse for taking a drop of drink, is he?"

"Of course he ain't," said Deegan stoutly.

"I have been persuaded of that these twenty years," said Mrs. West smiling at him. "Now I wish to per-

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suade Mr. Leigh and his daughter for I fear they may be bigoted."

"A man's rather better if anything," asserted Deegan, but with just a shade of hesitation in his voice.

"Of course," observed Mrs. West noticing it; "if you would prefer to go on tramp—"

"Oh, quit," said Deegan spreading his hands before his eyes as though to shut out something he saw. "But suppose Leigh says he don't give a red and just goes on with his prohibition after his girl's married? He's tough—you don't know him—but he's real tough."

"No," said Mrs. West; "of course I may not know him, but I can tell you this—if you follow my advice you will ruin him. He drank himself at one time and I should not wonder if Briscoe did not start him again—a trifle will do it, he is not cured yet though he thinks he is. Now, where is this lad Briscoe?"

"In the third room. Why?"

"I want to see him."

"Mind yourself then. He was awful mad when I took him in a drink this morning and got reachin' for his razor. You see, he's sorter sick of himself."

"He won't hurt me. You think over what I said. Remember, ruin and the road again or—It's you or Leigh; one must go under, you or Leigh."

With a nod she left the room and he heard her going upstairs.

"Me or Leigh," repeated Deegan. "It's true, Leigh or me. As for you, you're just a she-devil but all the same I want you." Suddenly his words seemed to astonish him. He repeated them in a lower tone, and stared about

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him with a curious air of surprise. "Lord! That's mighty queer," he said.

He sat down again and meditated in silence for some few minutes, and his countenance expressed clearly his feeling of amazement.

"It's truth," he said presently; "that's what's been puzzling me." He looked down at himself as though not quite certain of his own identity. "I do reckon this is what women-folk call bein'—bein' in love."

He walked away, shaking his head solemnly.

CHAPTER XII.

OUTSIDE the bedroom Mrs. West hesitated a little and then knocked. There was no answer and so she knocked again and then as there was still no notice taken she entered.

On the bed half dressed and all dishevelled lay Arthur Briscoe, his cheeks white, his eyes dull and glassy, and his head so closely buried in his arms that he had heard neither Mrs. West's knocking nor her entrance. On a chair by the bed-side stood a water jug half empty, and on a small table by the window lay an open razor. The lad's whole appearance was indescribably forlorn, it was evident that the bed had not been slept in, even his boots he had never removed and little bits of straw and hay clung to his person. The sunshine peeped in at a corner of the window blind; and Mrs. West smiled as she glanced round, well satisfied.

She went up to the bed and put one hand on his shoulder. He rolled over and stared up at her, not clearly comprehending who she was.

"Does your head ache?" she asked.

"Splitting," he answered.

"Drink this," she said putting a glass to his lips; "it will make you feel better."

He shook his head. "I won't," he said. "Get out of this." He rolled over again.

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"You are not very polite," she observed with a laugh. "I never had a thing like that said to me before."

"Oh, I beg your pardon. I don't want to be bothered. Deegan was here. If he comes again, I'll kill him."

She laughed a second time, though it hardly seemed as though she were much amused. She guessed why he refused—that in his self disgust, he had determined never to drink spirits again.

"This is medicine," she said, "it is not whisky—just smell—there is peppermint."

She bent down and slipped one hand between his burning forehead and the pillow. She spoke gently and half by persuasion; half by quiet pressure she made him sit up and drink off the contents of the tumbler she held. Once he had tasted it he drank eagerly, tilting the glass to get every drop, and sighing as he put it down that there was no more. Then she made him lie down again; in spite of his protests she removed his boots and loosened his shirt collar, and then as though he were a baby she sponged his face and hands and rubbed them with a little eau-de-cologne.

"That is good," he murmured; "you are very kind."

"Now you must sleep," she said.

He closed his eyes obediently, but almost at once opened them again.

"There wasn't any whisky in that medicine?" he asked.

"Not a drop," she answered; quite truly though brandy had been its chief ingredient, the taste disguised by various spices. She smiled down at him as she spoke, and his eyes closed again so that soon she knew he was sleeping quietly.

After dinner she returned and when Briscoe woke later

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on she was still watching by him. He lay for a little in silence, his head felt better now and his brain clearer. Gradually he remembered his conduct of the night before and he groaned softly in supreme disgust at himself. Instantly she was by his side, soothing him with gentle words.

"I made such a beast of myself last night," he cried, the impulse of confession strong upon him. "You wouldn't touch me if you knew."

"It would be a strange and hard woman that could despise a man for one slip," she said slowly—very slowly and distinctly. "It is always a woman's place and her joy to help a man to do better and to conquer himself." Then still slowly and distinctly she repeated the words over again as though she wished to impress the thought on his mind. "It would be a strange and hard woman that could despise a man for one slip; it is always her place and her joy to help the man on to better things."

He lay still without speaking but his lips moved and it was evident he repeated her words to himself. Presently he said.

"Do all women think that? But it is too much to ask. One has no right: it is not fair."

"It is *not* too much to ask," said Mrs. West in her slow, almost solemn tones; "and it is not right to take from a woman her dearest privilege—that of helping the man."

"Ah, but," he said, turning to her eagerly; "you don't know—I will tell you—if you don't mind."

"Indeed I don't," she answered and she laid a soft hand on his forehead. She wondered how she could increase his confidence. A phrase came into her mind, and the words formed themselves on her lips. Yet she hesitated

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over uttering them longer than she had hesitated over worse things. Even through her mad mood of reckless hate, she felt the words a betrayal of the most sacred instinct of her sex. "But to make John Leigh suffer—anything, anything," she muttered with a quick thrill—of horror, of joy, of she knew not what strange emotion. In a voice low and gentle and quite steady, she said: "Tell me all, dear lad; think it is your mother—your mother you speak to."

"You are awfully good," he said miserably; "but you don't understand—even mother—and you don't understand." He stopped and shuddered, but the need for sympathy was on him and in broken words he told his story: how in England he had got into bad hands, how he had learnt to drink—a little; how one day there had been a public scene; and how then his angry father had sent him out to America to conquer the habit or fail as it might chance, but at least far from another scandal.

"By yourself you must fail," said Mrs. West softly, "but if you could find some one to help you—some one to help you always—you might soon conquer it."

"Do you think so?" said Briscoe and again he was silent.

"I am sure of it," said Mrs. West earnestly; "and such a chance is the greatest privilege a woman can obtain. Think what it is to us to look at some great man and know that but for us he would be worthless—to hear him praised and know that but for our help he would be outcast from society."

He was silent, looking at her with meditative eyes. Then he said.

"But you don't know—I break out—I want to quarrel

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with every one—I am a beast—I hit a barmaid once.” He said this with difficulty and with stammering. “That’s why father sent me out here,” he concluded.

“Violent,” said Mrs. West, and she hid her face that he might not see the wicked joy that shone there. “But with some good woman’s constant help?”

“A man has no right to ask or accept such a sacrifice,” he said slowly.

“Ah!” she cried; “you do not understand. It is because you need that you have a right.”

She sat by his side and talked to him gently, soothing his remorse, restoring his self respect and always dwelling upon the need he had of a woman’s help. At last by little hints she let him see she guessed he loved Annie Leigh, and then he cried out in a sudden passion of self repulsion that he was lower than the brutes and not worthy to touch her hands.

“Then let her make you worthy,” said Mrs. West.

“Ah, if she only would,” he said and again he listened while she told him, most willing to be convinced, how deeply Annie or any woman would value the privilege of reforming him. At last it seemed to him that because he needed reformation he was actually more worthy—not less. With perverted skill she showed that all men have weaknesses, that it was natural and to be expected, that those who had none lay in some vague way under suspicion of a worse thing, that only men with vices to overcome were worthy a good woman’s care. Nor, as she with her sweet gentle smile and quiet voice talked thus to him, did her words seem wicked or even nonsensical. He almost became proud of himself for needing reformation and glad to think that Annie would secure so admirable a

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subject for her efforts. Mrs. West saw clearly enough as she talked where the half truth ended and the great untruth began and she even prided herself on the dexterity with which she wove the two together and made it all seem one, warp and weft together.

At last she went away, leaving Briscoe fully determined to prosecute his suit with Annie and feeling that no great effort was needed on his part to conquer his failing since that would be a pleasing duty to devolve upon his future wife.

Mrs. West had not been downstairs long, and was occupied in preparing the supper, when Deegan came into the kitchen. She told him that everything was going well and that she intended visiting the Leighs the next day.

Deegan had been leaning against the wall listening with eagerness and with rather a puzzled feeling, for he did not quite see the meaning of all this manoeuvring. But at this last remark he scowled angrily and then asked in a very sulky tone:

"What for?"

"I have reasons," she said, rather surprised at his expression, but simply supposing that something had happened to annoy him. "I wish to see them."

"You appear powerful fond of seein' 'em," he remarked.

"It is necessary."

"I don't see no necessity," he retorted. "I don't catch on to all this dodgy business. Get at 'em and do for 'em, I say."

"Do you want me to leave the affair?" she asked with

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exasperation. "Upon my word I never met so foolish a person as you."

"Oh, go on, call me somethin' more," said Deegan gloomily. "I know I'm only dirt, I don't mind. Jump on me with both feet."

"Simply go away and don't annoy me so. Then you won't get 'jumped on,' as you call it."

"You appear to be in a mighty hurry to see them Leighs again."

"I am."

"Well, what for?"

"That's my affair."

"Oh, all right. Now, you listen to me—if you get thick with John Leigh, I'll shoot him; sure thing, I will."

"I am not likely to get thick with him," said Mrs. West slowly. "You need not fear that."

"Oh, you talk," said Deegan. "But what are you so almighty anxious to see him again for?"

"I told you—I have plans."

"Mind you don't fool me any, that's all. For I mean it all right about the shootin'." He nodded to her as though to emphasize his words and then walked out of the kitchen.

"Upon my word," said Mrs. West as she saw him go; "I do believe the silly man is jealous—well, that is funny."

This thought continued to amuse her at intervals until she forgot all about it.

CHAPTER XIII

JOHN Leigh was busy working in the fields on the afternoon of the following day when his father, who had ridden over on some message, came walking slowly towards him.

"*She* is over there," he said as he came up to his son and laid one hand on the plough. The fresh sweet smell of the new turned earth came up to them and the labouring horses, glad of the respite, stood placidly, their only movement to whisk away intrusive flies. The two men looked at each other. "*She* is with Annie," added the old man, and John nodded his head gloomily.

"She will tell her everything," he said. "Well! it's my own doing and I must not complain."

"Poor lad," said the old man and put his hand on the other's shoulder, looking at him kindly. "I think Annie ought to be told. It seems hardly fair to the child herself that she should hear the story as Constance may tell it—for Constance is very bitter, I fear."

"Can you wonder? It may be hard on 'Annie, but it is Connie's right to be considered first, and I said she should do exactly as she liked. Did you speak to her—had she said anything?"

"No, not yet. They were talking together. I only waited a moment and then came to tell you. But Annie was pressing her to stay to supper."

"It is far to come to go back before then, now that the

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evenings are longer," said John as though the point required deep thought. He took hold of the plough handles again and stood ready to start. "I won't come in to supper to-night," he said. "Do you mind telling Pete to bring out the other team at five? I will work straight on till dusk. If Connie wishes to tell Annie she shall at least have opportunity."

He called to his horses and set off again. For a little the old man watched them as they went steadily up the field, turning the earth in a long straight furrow and then he walked slowly back towards the house, shaking his head as he went and muttering to himself.

"Poor John, poor boy," he said. "Poor Annie. Poor Connie; poor, poor Connie."

In the shelter of a bluff he paused and sat down on the grass, watching the roof of the house, just visible above the trees in the garden that surrounded it. He knew that Mrs. West sat there with Annie and he wondered and dreaded what she might say.

Meanwhile on the pleasant verandah of the house, enjoying the warm sunshine of the spring, Annie talked happily with her guest. She had welcomed her cordially yet with a touch of constraint that her visitor noticed immediately. Presently the conversation dropped for a moment and suddenly Annie leaned forward and said:

"You know, Mrs. West, I know all about that with father."

"Oh," said Mrs. West and looked at her with swift doubt. There was a slight flush on Annie's cheeks and her eyes were downcast. With the toe of her shoe she was pushing at the trellis work at the front of the verandah

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and she continued when Mrs. West made no further answer:

"Father is very different from the other people round here. Some of them don't seem to mind how much they owe, but father is always very particular and always pays everything and I am sure—I am sure that quite soon—very soon—"

"Do you think so?" said Mrs. West vaguely. She saw that some remark was expected, but did not quite know what to say. It was evident to her that Annie was under some misapprehension.

"Oh, yes," said Annie. "I am sure he will pay you."

"Oh, so am I," said Mrs. West; "he will indeed—to the last—to the uttermost farthing."

"Yes," said Annie with a little surprise at the expression the other had used.

"Of course, there is absolutely no hurry," continued Mrs. West. "I have waited twenty years—I can wait as long again."

"Oh, but you shan't," cried Annie. "Father will manage somehow. We might sell a cow or two," she added thoughtfully; "and we could make quite a lot out of butter and eggs—I am dreadfully extravagant with cream," she added with a sigh.

"I see," said Mrs. West, looking rather strangely at the eager girl, and understanding now that she supposed there was some question of money owing. For her own purposes Mrs. West was quite willing that Annie should remain under this impression and so she smiled and continued: "You must understand I am not in any hurry. I am quite willing the investment—I regard it as an investment—should run on until I receive the last farthing."

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She smiled again as she said this and Annie shrank from some indefinable impression she received and then was angry with herself for such childishness. "I reckon," continued Mrs. West, "that the debt has just doubled since it was incurred; but it will not prevent you from receiving me as a friend? I am so great a stranger here; I only came through a series of accidents, and I feel so much alone. It would be very dreadful if the accident of this debt cut me off from the only home-like, really English house I know of."

"Oh, no; of course not;" said Annie hastily, her pleased expression showing how she appreciated the compliment. "I am sure father will be glad to see you whenever you can come."

"And then, my dear child," added Mrs. West with a smile that seemed both shy and charming; "if you will let me say so, it is very pleasant for an old woman like me to chat sometimes with young people again—if you don't find me too tiring."

"Oh, you must not think that," cried Annie. "It is very nice of you to like to come," she added impulsively.

"It is not my fault there is a debt," continued Mrs. West. "Let us quite forget all about it—will you?—confident that your father will pay for all at the proper time—for all. Till then let us just be friends."

"You are very good," said Annie simply.

They went on talking, of the country, of the Old Country Annie had never seen, of the hundred little details of home life on which all women have a common ground. Annie was deeply flattered to be asked for one or two recipes and almost as pleased to accept a hint or two herself. Once or twice, too, quite incidentally, the con-

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versation touched on Briscoe, and Annie was interested to know that he made a favorable impression upon every one he met. She was just a little sorry that these references were so very brief and casual, but she reflected that of course that was only natural. She was quite surprised a few moments later to find that somehow he was being spoken of again.

Annie became quickly more friendly with her companion and thought herself very fortunate to have formed so pleasant a friendship. In the rather limited circle of Big End society Annie had found but few friends really congenial to her; most of the women were hard worked and poorly educated, with neither time nor inclination for any thought outside their narrow lives that were bounded by the crops and their children and the best way of making butter. Altogether Annie had led a specially lonely life in a necessarily lonely country. Her father had done his best of course, but no companionship of men can make up to a girl for the society of her own sex. So Annie was only too ready to become intimate with Mrs. West, and that lady who could be a fascinating companion when she chose, had little difficulty in winning her confidence.

Towards supper-time old Mr. Leigh came across the garden towards them. He looked nervously at the two women as he came, but they were talking in so quiet and friendly a fashion that he was at once reassured. "She's not spoken yet," he said to himself as he approached them and greeted her. It was soon time for Annie to prepare the meal and on some excuse he followed her into the kitchen and gave her her father's message that he would not come in till dusk. Annie listened with obvious discontent and was a little inclined to rebel.

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"I don't think it looks very nice," she said indignantly. "Why! Mrs. West may think it is because of her—perhaps that he is afraid. And I just made her stop when she wanted to go earlier because I thought father would be in. Can't you get him to come, grandpa? Tell him it's very rude."

The old man shook his head.

"I have tried," he said. "He has an idea Mrs. West would prefer him to stay away, I think. You know he is very determined if he feels he is right?"

"Oh, yes; I know," said Annie rather crossly. "Pig-headed, I call it," she added to herself and having relieved her feelings recovered her temper. "And it's absurd; Mrs. West is so nice," she continued aloud. "You will like her, grandpa."

"Do you think so? What have you been talking about?"

"Oh, everything. Do you know she didn't know how to make bannock—isn't it funny? And she has been telling me all about Stratford-on-Avon and Shakespeare's own house—and Westminster Abbey—oh, and grandpa, she has been to Monte Carlo and seen the gambling." And Annie's eyes grew round with awe and she quite forgot the biscuit she was baking till a smell of burning called her back to every day life.

"Nothing else?" asked the old man, still vaguely uneasy.

"Oh, yes; everything. Venice and lots—oh, dear; that's burning again."

Annie became too busy with her supper preparations for further speech. And old Mr. Leigh wondered whether it were possible that Mrs. West had relented, or if she

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were keeping her disclosure to the last to employ it with greater effect.

"I fear that is more likely," he murmured. "Poor Constance is very bitter." But none the less a little feeling of hope grew within him. "If she could forgive him, they might be quite happy together again," he added with a sigh.

He went down to the stable on the errand he had invented, and when he returned Annie was telling Mrs. West that her father could not come to supper. It was evident she found the explanation difficult from the way in which she blushed and stammered, but Mrs. West received it so easily and spoke so naturally of the continuous work necessary on a farm that the awkwardness of the situation quickly evaporated and they went into supper together, all apparently on the best of terms. But of them all only Annie was really at ease, for Mr. Leigh listened to every word with apprehension, lest it might herald the disclosure he feared; and beneath Mrs. West's calm and smiling countenance boiled a very frenzy of jealous hatred as she saw this strange girl sit in the place that was her own by right.

Supper had been hastened that Mrs. West might start back early and it was soon time for her to go. Mr. Leigh went to the stable to fetch her horse and as he had to return to his own farm, he brought his own also. In a few moments he was ready and he drove Mrs. West's buggy to the front of the house, his own horse tied behind. With keen anxiety as he drove up he looked to see if the last moments had brought the dreaded denunciation. But both women were placid and smiling, chatting over some trivial point of fancy work that Annie had

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been busy with; and with deep relief he understood that she would not speak—that day, at any rate.

"Perhaps, then," he said to himself; "she is relenting; perhaps then even yet she may be brought to forgive John and make us all happy again." With a partiality for Annie he placed Mrs. West's hesitation to her credit, thinking that the girl had really won a way into the other woman's affection. It seemed to him that everything might yet come right and the twenty year burden be shifted from their shoulders. His face lighted at the idea and there was a quite perceptible change, a new briskness, in his movements as he helped Mrs. West into the buggy and then asked if he might accompany her part way. "There are two trails," he said; "and it is possible you might take the wrong one."

"Oh, grandpa," cried Annie in great surprise; "how could she? Why, Mrs. West—" and she was launching into long directions when the old man interrupted her.

"Yes, yes, Annie," he said; "but you forget Mrs. West is a stranger. I should like to accompany her that far. 'Don' can trot behind."

Without waiting for further permission he climbed into the buggy, took the reins and whip from her hand, and set off.

"She is really very nice," said Annie to herself as she watched them go; "but I wonder why she would not kiss me when we said good-bye. She must have seen I wanted to and she would only shake hands. I do hope she did not think me forward."

With her cheeks a little red at this idea Annie returned to the house and busied herself with her evening duties.

For some distance old Mr. Leigh drove in silence

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for he did not quite know what to say and Mrs. West showed no disposition to speak, sitting in a moody silence that contrasted strongly with her former bright cheerful behaviour. At last he turned to her and said:

"We must thank you for not telling Annie."

She did not seem to hear, but presently she said:

"Do you know why I said nothing?"

"Because, Constance; because, child; I hope—I trust you have decided to forgive poor John."

"Poor John," she repeated and in her voice there was a bitter sneer. "No, not that; but because it was too poor a revenge. I want something to cut deeper than that."

"Revenge," he repeated and he almost laughed. "Constance, there is nothing you can do. Do you know I have twice saved him from suicide—and once the only argument that affected him was that life was harder than death. I wish you could understand that he has suffered and is suffering—a man can suffer more from his own thoughts than from any outside circumstances. It is hard to live when you have entirely lost everything—even your own self-respect."

"Nevertheless," said Mrs. West; "I will find a way—I will find a way."

"Poor child," he said with a deep sigh. "You are very bitter. But you do not understand, for even if you injured him in any way you would do him a great benefit—do him good—not harm. You would restore something of his self-respect, for he would accept punishment as an atonement. Connie, he would be glad to suffer, for to those who repent nothing is so terrible as impunity."

"That is a lie," said Mrs. West.

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"It is the truth," said the old man. "Perhaps, some day, Constance, you may find that truth for yourself."

There was something in his words that for a moment troubled her, but she put the impression by—it returned to her in after days.

"In any case," she said presently; "I will do him that benefit."

"He did you great wrong—but the greater the wrong, the greater the need for forgiveness. Forgive him, Connie," the old man's voice grew solemn in his strong appeal. "Forgive him that you may be forgiven."

"I will die unforgiven, then," she said; "and so shall he."

"You might be happy together again," he urged, but with little hope in his voice for hers was so bitter.

"We might have been," she agreed. "Now I shall be happy in his misery. If I were in hell I should be happy if he were by my side."

As she spoke another meaning that might lie in such a wish came to her and struck her dumb. She remembered how years before he had spoken so to her. "Hell would not be hell with you by my side," he had cried to her once. Then she had rebuked him for such words, and now she had repeated them unawares and with so different a meaning.

"He loves you still," said the old man sadly.

"You lie," she cried in a sudden flare of rage and lifting her hand as though she would strike him. She gave an inarticulate sob of rage, and motioned to him to descend. "You get down," she said.

Her aspect was so wild that to soothe her he descended and she gathered whip and reins into her trembling hands.

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She hardly gave him time to unloosen his horse from behind before she started off. He remained looking after her. Suddenly she wheeled her buggy round and drove straight back to him.

"I will tell you what I will do," she cried at him, shaking her whip in the air with furious gestures. "He shall see that Annie of his—his daughter—treated as I was—married to a worthless drunken husband. And in his daughter's sufferings he shall know mine."

"You are foolish, child," he answered, almost amused. "Your anger is making you absurd. Why, of course, Annie will choose her own husband, and he will certainly not be a drunkard."

"Perhaps it is already settled," observed Mrs. West; her fierce manner changing in a moment to one of polite interest.

"Oh, no;" answered the old man simply; "but I should not be surprised if young Briscoe did not ask her—he is evidently thinking much of her and he is a sober, steady young fellow."

"Oh, young Briscoe;" repeated Mrs. West and had to struggle to restrain her laughter. "Of course—in that case—still she may refuse him."

"It is not likely," said the old man with a renewed confidence at the sight of her assumed dismay. "I have noticed things," he added, nodding to her and quite pleased to think how easily he had proved the absurdity of her plan. "But, Connie, that was a very wicked thought."

"How dare you talk of wickedness when you are trying all the time to make excuses for your son?" cried Mrs. West with passionate indignation. She struck her horse heavily with her whip and started off at a sharp gallop.

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"It is wonderful," she said to herself; "wonderful to think they should mention Briscoe. It cannot be merely chance. Oh, this will reach him—punish him, not impunity in that old man's drivel. Impunity!" She repeated the word with bitter contempt and drove on muttering: "Violent—threw a glass at a barmaid—oh, it is wonderful, wonderful."

CHAPTER XIV.

SWIFTLY the spring grew into summer, and to all outward appearance matters remained unchanged. Mrs. West and Annie, though they met seldom, increased their acquaintance, till the older woman ranked as the girl's most intimate friend. John Leigh looked on in sombre silence, meeting Mrs. West occasionally, but seldom speaking to her, anticipating always the revelation that was to destroy his daughter's happiness and add yet another misery to those his long past sin had already brought forth. In vain his father urged him to do something, anything, that might soften the shock of the expected blow. He listened, but it seemed to him not seemly that he should make any effort to avoid the cup presented to his lips. Even when the old man spoke of Annie, his determination remained unaltered.

"It is my punishment," he said; "that always I must see the innocent suffer for my fault. What is done, is done; but Constance has a right to tell out the truth." Then he would go to his work and astonish even the laborious Canadian farmers by his unceasing toil.

This period did not prove a very happy time for Deegan. Continually he endeavoured to ingratiate himself with Mrs. West—"courtin' her for all he was worth," as he phrased it to himself—and she, engrossed with her own thoughts, did not conceal how he wearied her. Always she was occupied with the idea of her revenge. Although

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most of her time was fully taken up by her duties in the hotel, yet, as she moved quietly and steadily about her business, her mind brooded continually upon that one thing and to Deegan she barely gave a thought, except that now and then she found him in her way. To see her busy with her ordinary commonplace duties of cooking and housekeeping no one could have guessed her thoughts; or supposed that as she bent over a frying pan, turning the cooking meat, she meditated upon the destinies of men; or that, as she watched some bubbling stew, she saw framed there visions of a soul's ruin.

Deegan himself did not understand her in the least, but her very aloofness helped to inflame him, her silent figure flitting up and down the passages of his house appealed to him, so that he spent long hours in day dreams and would scheme to meet her at unexpected places. He realized, as he never had before, what it would be to have a woman's tender care always about him, his mind conceived pleasant visions of the future, and perhaps the increased patronage of the hotel, consequent upon meals better served and cooked, did not fail to exercise an influence upon him. Yet it was herself he longed for, and he watched her small slight figure passing to and fro, and racked his brains for new ways to please her, and with difficulty restrained himself from declaring his passion.

Then one day she told him she was going to drive out again to Leigh's and when in temper he flung away from her she hardly wondered what it was that vexed him. He did not interest her much—nothing did outside her plans—and she had forgotten that she had ever noticed anything in his behaviour.

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"What are you goin' for?" he demanded sullenly a little later, coming quickly upon her as she sat in her buggy just ready to start.

"I want to hurry things," she said; "It is time to make another move. Mr. Briscoe has not been here lately?"

"No," answered Deegan; "not for a while. He always swears off after a spree—he's one of that sort."

She nodded and drove away. He watched her go and for the rest of that afternoon was barely civil to those who happened to speak to him.

Mrs. West drove along a trail that now was familiar to her. Yet though she knew it she only knew it well enough to know that she was going right. Her mind was in a peculiar state, and as in the hotel she was hardly aware of the things that happened outside her own sphere, doing her work with a precision that was entirely mechanical, so on the trail she only noticed the few landmarks that were necessary guides. Not for her was any sense of the beauty and interest of the untrammelled nature through which she passed; the great fields of growing wheat, ripening in the generous sunshine; the air hot, yet fresh and clean; the universal prairies, stretching so far, so boundless, that almost one understood eternity.

About half way she came to a little low-lying stream running through a huge ravine, measuring more than a mile from bank to bank, where once perhaps had flowed some huge river that now had dwindled to this tiny brook. By the side of the stream grew many trees and bushes on which the eye, satiated with the bare majesty of the prairies, rested pleasantly. In some places the trees grew in thick abundance, tangled with an undergrowth

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of bushes, a little further on they would be comparatively thin and scanty, and then again would broaden at a sheltered bend into the beginnings of a forest—until the merciless prairie fire should come and bring destruction.

It was a scene eminently qualified to make a spectator realize his own insignificance before the huge outspread of nature; all the more impressive for its quietude and monotony, seeming to suggest that this could never be troubled by any act of man. For the far-stretching prairies are not like the great mountains, tormented by avalanche and landslip; not like the flowing rivers that for ever pass on and onwards; not like the seas fretted and foaming beneath each chance wind of Heaven. But like the eternal stars themselves they always remain, for ever vast and changeless.

Into the ravine, the trail led by a steep and rough passage, worn each spring by the melting snow that for a time restored the little brook to some faint remembrance of its former state. Mrs. West drove down slowly and carefully, and then followed the trail across the ancient river bed, her mind so occupied with its own sombre brooding that it seemed as though no outward impression could reach her. She passed the stream by a shallow ford—there was no bridge as yet—and then her glance lighted on a pony, tied to a tree near by. She looked at it vaguely—then recognized it as one she had seen Annie riding. Instantly she reined in her own horse and sat thinking, wrinkling her brows as she gazed steadily at the pony.

After a little she got down and entered the brushwood that bordered the trail as it ran from the stream up the side of the ravine to the level prairie above. Walking

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with extreme care, both to avoid making any noise and to avoid leaving footsteps, she at last came to a spot where she had a view of the banks of the stream. At a little distance she saw Annie sitting on a piece of open land that lay a little back from the water beneath a steep overhanging rock. She was busily occupied sketching the trees on the opposite bank, and evidently was quite unaware that she was over-looked.

For some little time Mrs. West lay there, her finger tapping on the ground, a nervous trick of hers that generally indicated she was thinking deeply. Presently, still with the same care, she worked her way round to the overhanging rock beneath which was Annie. On the top of this grew some trees and a few bushes so that she was well sheltered from observation. She crawled to the brink on her hands and knees, going by inches that she might give no sign of her presence. She peered over and saw, with a strange feeling that was almost awe, that Annie had just moved and now sat directly beneath. Her hat was off and she was evidently resting in the shade of the rock. In her hand she held the open sketch-book, apparently comparing her work with the scene opposite.

Long and intently Mrs. West watched the unsuspecting girl, who sat quietly, humming a dance tune to herself and occasionally adding another touch to her sketch. Close to Mrs. West's right hand lay three or four stones, each about twice the size of her closed fist, and to her their presence there seemed almost providential.

"It is as though it were meant," she said, and then again; "I seem but an instrument with everything placed ready to my hand."

Her glance went to the stones and then to the uncon-

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scious girl beneath, her eye measuring the distance. Then as though her mind were suddenly made up, she took one of the stones, and with careful deliberation, dropped it so that it fell as aimed, right on Annie's leg between the knee and the foot.

With pale face Mrs. West drew back, suppressing by an effort the trembling of her limbs and an instinctive desire to run; and only by a greater effort checking the answering cry that rose to her lips as she heard Annie's quick scream of pain and surprise. Slowly and carefully Mrs. West made her way through the trees back to the trail, and once she started as a second cry of pain reached her, and once she stopped short to listen to another sound, dim in the distance but yet distinct in the calm of the summer's day. For a little she did not know what it was; then recognized it as a woman sobbing.

"Oh, well!" she said shrugging her shoulders, "I have cried, too—and a stone on your foot is not as bad as a blow on your face—she won't be blinded or disfigured for life." And she cried out aloud; "Justice; that is all I desire and it is my right. Justice—eye for eye and tooth for tooth."

Slowly, still with that restraint upon herself for fear she should break into a run, Mrs. West walked back to where her buggy stood and looked thoughtfully at Annie's pony. It was secured rather carelessly, the bridle just tossed over a handy branch. Mrs. West seated herself in her buggy, backed the horse a few steps away, and then brought her whip down upon the pony's back. With a whinny of surprise and terror it reared and plunged, and Mrs. West lashed it again and then again till with a snort it broke loose and galloped off. She watched

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it a little for fear it might return, but seeing that it galloped straight on she drove away convinced that even if Annie could manage to gain the trail she would not be able to catch her pony.

From the ford where this had happened to the Leigh farm was nearly seven miles, and though up and down the stream there were several homesteads, none was near to this particular spot, as the ground was rough and very stony. In the winter time people often came that way for wood, since a good load could easily be obtained, but in the summer few passed except casual travellers from one farm to another. At present, there was even less likelihood than usual of any one passing, as most people were busy with the haying which had just begun. So there was little chance of any assistance reaching Annie, and the straying of her pony would effectually prevent her from helping herself, even if her hurt did not itself prevent her from moving. Mrs. West reflected that Annie would probably be very frightened, might not improbably fear being left there to starve. She pictured to herself the lonely girl waiting in fear and pain, listening eagerly for some sound of approaching help.

"But I won't hurry for that," said Mrs. West and she went perhaps even more slowly than she had intended.

At last, however, she drove up to Briscoe's shack. The barking of dogs announced her and in a few moments Briscoe himself came out from behind an outbuilding where he had been busy. He welcomed her with a touch of embarrassment in his manner, for though they had met several times since his drinking bout, the shame of it was still raw in his memory.

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"I want you to harness up and go to the ford across the creek," she said, slowly, flicking at the flies with her whip.

"To the creek," he repeated, looking puzzled.

"Yes," she said. "I saw Miss Leigh's pony just now; it was loose, but had its saddle on, and as I passed the creek I noticed a place that looked as though a horse had been tied and broken away. If it has strayed from her, she will not like walking back all that way in this heat."

"Goodness no!" exclaimed Briscoe. "I'll go at once. Thanks awfully—you don't think she's hurt at all," he added, agitatedly.

Mrs. West looked straight at him.

"It is possible," she said. "She might have fallen—or something."

"I'll go at once," he repeated, and started at a run for his stable.

In a moment or two he came out leading a horse and began hurriedly to harness it to his buggy. Mrs. West drove over and sat watching him in silence. Soon he was ready, and without even stopping to put on his coat he sprang to the seat.

"Do you love her?" said Mrs. West suddenly, not looking at him but intently before her as though she saw something far out on the open prairie.

He stared at her, too surprised at first even to answer, and then flushed deeply.

"Do you love her?" she repeated. "Come, Mr. Briscoe," she continued, looking at him with the smile she could always summon at desire; "we are old friends, are we not? You trusted me before—trust me now—I should wish to help you if I might."

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Briscoe looked at her gratefully, but still he was embarrassed. He found it difficult to speak and his blush became more vivid.

"You know," she said, speaking very gently, "I have been in love, too. That was years ago, but still perhaps I might help you yet."

"Yes, I do," exclaimed Briscoe suddenly, the words coming with a rush. "But I have no right—you know—Oh, why am I such a beast?"

"You must not be morbid," said Mrs. West gravely; "none of us are perfect. Believe me, a girl loves a man all the better if she sees he needs her help in any way."

"But she isn't an ordinary girl," said Briscoe; "she's—oh, she's so different. And you know what I am." But his voice was already more hopeful—brighter—as though her words had encouraged him.

"I know you are a very nice lad," said Mrs. West, smiling at him. "A good, honest lad. Now you take my advice and speak—then you will have a motive for keeping straight. That's all you need. And you will have saved her a long, tiring walk, so that she will be grateful to you and glad to see you. Tell her you love her."

"I must tell her—the truth about myself first," he said with a sigh. He looked up at Mrs. West as he spoke and saw that she was trying to conceal a rather contemptuous smile at this idea. Against argument he would probably have been proof, for in examining his position he would have seen its strength. But against this subtle smile of ridicule he was helpless and he flushed hotly as he said: "Don't you think I ought?"

"Not unless you are prepared to be hopelessly misunderstood," she answered. "Of course, you must tell her

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later when she is more used to you and can look at the thing in an unprejudiced light; but now it would be a great shock and she might take a morbid view."

"I could put off telling her, then?" he said, a little hesitatingly, but obviously relieved at the idea.

"Certainly, most scrupulous of men," answered Mrs. West lightly. "And don't tell her I sent you or that you have seen me—I have a particular reason for wishing her to remain in ignorance of that. You will promise me?"

"Of course, if you wish it."

"Thank you so much. Now you had better go."

He gathered up his reins and as he started she called to him.

"Come into town to-morrow and tell me how you fared."

He waved his whip to show he heard, and he drove as fast as his horse could gallop.

Mrs. West watched him for a few moments and then returned to town by an alternative trail. She said to herself that she was very well pleased and at intervals she repeated: "Justice—I have a right to justice." She told Deegan when she reached the hotel that everything was progressing well and that he would soon see the results.

But it troubled and annoyed her greatly that that night she dreamed she heard a woman sobbing and could in no way escape the sound.

CHAPTER XV

ON the following afternoon Mrs. West gave up her accustomed walk and sat quietly sewing in a corner of the hotel verandah till at last she saw young Briscoe drive rapidly up to the stables. He took off his hat to her as he passed, and it only needed one glance at his smiling face, and at the new regard for appearance shown in his attire, for her to understand that the meeting of the day before had turned out as she desired.

"Young fellow looks mighty spry—wonder what's on," observed Deegan, who had been hanging about in her vicinity all afternoon.

"There's no one at the stable," suggested Mrs. West. "Hadn't you beter go?"

"'Spose so," said Deegan, rather sulkily, and went off.

In a few minutes Briscoe joined Mrs. West, who welcomed him with a smile and cleared her work from a seat near so that he might sit down.

"It's all right," he said, and as he spoke he gave a little delighted laugh as though the wonder of the thing were still fresh to him.

"I congratulate you," said Mrs. West. "Heartily," she added.

He sat for a little in silence swinging his hat between his hands, a pleasant smile on his handsome face.

"It seems too good to be true," he said shyly, turning

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to her with an air diffident and yet assured of sympathy. "But I'm going to try to deserve my luck."

"Of course," answered Mrs. West; but something in her manner served to check him a little—though only a very little.

"Do you know, I found Annie in rather a bad fix?" he continued. "It was providential you saw her pony straying—simply providential. I shall always be grateful to you."

"Why? What was wrong?" asked Mrs. West with admirably feigned surprise.

"She was hurt," he explained, and went on to tell how a stone had fallen and bruised her so that she could not walk. She had been intensely relieved to see him, for she was becoming very frightened, and he had been intensely sorry for her plight; nor was it difficult to see through his narrative how the accident had drawn them together so that her gratitude and his sympathy had quickly brought about declaration and acceptance.

"But it was funny about that stone falling," said Briscoe as he finished. "She might have lain there till she—starved."

"It was fortunate it was no worse," agreed Mrs. West. "I suppose something just happened to disturb it—one might go a thousand times again and such a thing never happen. You must tell her how sorry I am, and that I will drive over to see her as soon as possible. Is she able to walk?"

"Oh, no; she is lying on the sofa this morning."

"And what does Mr. Leigh say to it all?"

"He seemed awfully surprised—just as though he had

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never thought of such a thing. I am to write home this mail."

"And when will you be married?"

"Oh, soon after harvest, I thought—however, that can be settled later."

"It is all very nice, isn't it?" said Mrs. West, and suddenly she shot at him a quick upward glance. "You are happy?" she queried softly.

He did not answer her question directly, but his face was eloquent.

"It's all so wonderful," he breathed presently and then carried a little beyond himself by the need of sympathy, the wish to outpour his feelings, he spoke of his wonderful good fortune and his plans for the future, while Mrs. West sat and listened and dropped little sympathetic words. Two or three times he urged that the marriage ought to take place before the hard weather set in, so that they could go home to England for the honeymoon and be out again in good time for the work in the spring.

"You mean to settle down, then, here?" said Mrs. West.

"Oh, yes; I think so. Annie says she must not go far from her people, and it really is a beautiful country, you know." And Briscoe looked at the dusty track before them, and the shabby little frame houses, and the broken sidewalk; and in his eyes they were all transfigured, seeming beautiful.

"But I must go and do my shopping," he continued. "There are several things I must get."

"One moment," she said, and leaving him returned with a tray bearing two glasses. "Before you go," she said, "we will drink your health and hers together, shall we?"

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Briscoe shook his head. His manner was a little embarrassed but his voice was firm.

"I must give that up now," he said; "it wouldn't do."

"Oh, nonsense," she answered. "It's only a drop to drink good-luck—you don't get engaged every day."

She picked up one glass and pushed the other to him with such a natural movement, so simple an air of assured expectation, that he nearly took it. She drank to Annie's health, and he stood awkwardly, looking as uncomfortable as he felt.

"I must give it up," he said; "entirely."

She glanced at him and saw his lips pressed together with an air of resolution. She recognized that it would be wiser to give way.

"Perhaps you are right," she said. "In any case, I heartily congratulate you—and you will tell her I will be out soon to congratulate her also, won't you? I wonder—"

"Wonder what?" asked Briscoe.

"How it will end?" she said slowly. "If you will be happy?" And as she spoke a sudden light flashed across her countenance; flashed and passed, and left her dreamy and abstracted as before.

Briscoe was rather amused.

"Yes, rather," he said; "you wait and see; but I must be off now."

He had scarcely gone when Deegan, who had been hanging about at a distance, came up to her.

"Well?" he said.

"He is to marry Annie Leigh," she answered; "after harvest."

"Quick work," he observed. "My! but he do look

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spry ; got a kind of kick-up to his walk like a horse after an extra feed of oats."

"He is very happy."

"I suppose," agreed Deegan. "Reckon it does make you feel awful good and happy like."

He began to be restless, to cross and uncross his legs and to fidget about. Two or three times it seemed as though he were about to speak, but Mrs. West, looking straight in front of her, took no notice of him.

"Awful happy," he said presently. "Eh?"

"I daresay," she answered indifferently.

They relapsed into silence again, and saw Briscoe cross to a store opposite. He walked briskly and smiled to himself so that his whole appearance was eloquent of his content. Deegan watched him enviously.

"It must be real good to feel like that," he said. "I wish I was him. At least," he added hurriedly, fearful of being misunderstood, "I mean I wish I was fixed like him, only not to the same girl. She ain't much grit or get-up about her. I seen her light out quicker'n most anything last fall, just for a heifer that was a bit frisky."

"I am afraid of cows, too," said Mrs. West.

This statement amused Deegan very much.

"About the only things you are scared of, then," he said and presently went away still chuckling over the idea.

Later on he manoeuvred so as to meet her in the hotel yard. It was dark and there was no one else about. She would have passed him and gone inside without speaking if he had not placed himself directly in her path.

"Mrs. West, ma'am," he said nervously; "I wanted just to speak a few words to you if I might."

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"What is it, then?" she asked.

"It's that there Briscoe," he said; "he seemed so—so happy—just simply bilin'—"

"I am glad," she said quickly. "Why should he not be happy while he can?"

"Oh, I ain't got no kick comin' against that." Deegan lapsed into silence and Mrs. West moved as though to go in. "Don't go," he said quickly.

"What is it, then?"

"You won't get mad?"

"Mad. No. What is it?"

"I only want you to marry me. Honest, Mrs. West, ma'am, I don't know how to say it slick like, and I know you're a real lady, and I know I ain't more'n dirt compared with you, what reads poetry and is cultured from the word 'go.' But—I feel it right here."

He touched his chest and leaned forward towards her as though expecting an answer and when she neither moved nor spoke, he began again.

"I'm mighty sorry I asked you that other time, ma'am; I feel real bad about it, for I didn't feel then like I do now. See here, Mrs. West, I'd be proud to work for you, and though I ain't no great shakes to look at, you might hunt all through Canada and the U-nited States and you wouldn't find a man prouder to work for you. It ain't a bad business. I can work and I can fight and you'd only have to lift your finger for me to do whatever you wanted—workin' or fightin'. And oh! it's just this way; I love you and I want you." He paused and hesitated and then repeated in a slow, stammering voice that generally was loud and quick enough: "I'd love and honour you all my

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life. Mrs. West, ma'am, you don't know how real I mean it. I do just mean it."

He stopped and wiped his brow in nervous agitation. She did not answer. Her mind was very far away. She remembered how another man had told her of his love, and her heart grew soft and tender at the memory. She felt very sorry for Deegan, for something in his rough pleading, perhaps the half-conscious hopelessness of it, touched her strongly. She thought, too, of Briscoe's young face and of how her plans would quench the happiness that had shone there all day.

"But it's all lies," she said to herself, and thought of how those other promises had been fulfilled. "It's all lies—they would be like him—like—John—and forget in a month and swear the same to another woman. None of them mean it."

Her thoughts went to her husband and his second act of marriage that was a crime before the law and so much—so much more to her. She remembered that Annie was his daughter but no child of hers. The tenderness that had touched her shrivelled away at the thought, and she felt her heart freeze again. She turned to Deegan with mockery and cold malice in her mind. She watched him with scorn as he stood before her, large in the dim evening light, moving nervously and fumbling with his hands.

"Cameron wants help," she said in clear, hard tones. "If you trouble me just once more I'll go there."

He sighed heavily.

"Is that an ox?" she asked with angry contempt.

"No, ma'am; it's me," he answered simply. "I couldn't help askin', though I knew it was no good. But I'll never say another word."

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"If you do, I go," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered humbly. "You see, it's this way. I had to ask—I'd rather have you jumpin' on me with both feet like now than know there was a man waitin' round the corner to give me a team of horses."

He turned away into the darkness and he did not appear in the saloon all that evening.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE harvest time came, the busy time when the long days are too short for all that needs to be done, the time when no man has opportunity for anything but work alone. Twice Briscoe and once John Leigh came into town for small necessities, but Mrs. West saw neither of them, since both hurried back to their work without a moment's delay. She herself drove over two or three times to sit by Annie who was still unable to walk and to congratulate her upon her engagement. These visits served greatly to increase their friendship, for Annie had no other woman in whom to confide and Mrs. West exerted all her powers to please and fascinate the girl.

With Annie she was always lively and even merry; but in the hotel her conduct was curiously different. There she remained silent and abstracted, quite ignoring Deegan and indeed every one else, and hardly ever speaking. Yet Deegan watching her, so absorbed to all appearance in the details of her daily work, felt his passion grow daily. He felt, without quite knowing why, that she was troubled, and he longed to comfort her. A new vein of imagination awoke in him. This silent, white-faced woman, with the abstracted manner and the quick, bird-like looks to either hand, roused in him new emotions, dim and strange. Sometimes he dreamed that he had taken her in his arms to comfort her; and he would sit silently for hours at a

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time planning fresh appeals that he knew he would never dare to urge. Meanwhile he waited on her each moment of the day, and it troubled him little that she seemed barely aware of him and would more often ignore his offers of assistance than accept them. If she but threw him a casual word, he was well satisfied.

A little later when the harvest was quite finished, the wheat all stacked and the pressure of the work relaxed so that the farmers found again a little time to spare, Deegan came to her one day as she was starting for her usual afternoon walk.

"Do you know there was a meetin' in Queen county last night?" he asked. "A strong out and out prohibitionist meetin'? John Leigh was there."

"Was there?" she said slowly. "Well?"

"Oh, nothin' much," answered Deegan. "He spoke, I heard; wants to cut licences. If they take mine, there'll be trouble." But this time Deegan repeated the threat without conviction, as though by little more than force of habit. "Art. Briscoe backed him up, too."

"Briscoe?" said Mrs. West, starting. "Briscoe?" she repeated.

"Yes, he's been going strong on that line ever since we made him full that night. Lord! he got a jag all right." Deegan smiled at what was to him the recollection of an excellent joke. "Now he's reckonin' to marry that Leigh girl, I s'pose he's bound to be careful," he continued.

"Ah, yes," said Mrs. West. "Of course, he will have to be careful. Very careful," she added, with emphasis.

"I reckon they'll make John Leigh Inspector of Licences."

"No, they won't; you need not fear that."

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"Oh, I don't know I care such an awful lot. I used to think a whole heap of the hotel, but I feel these days as though I didn't put much stock in anything—except you."

He looked up as he spoke, half frightened himself at his last two words, for he had continually before him the fear that she would carry out her threat of going to Cameron's. However, Mrs. West had already started on her walk, without waiting for the conclusion of his speech, and so had not heard him.

He stared after her for a little and then re-entered the bar and stood there moodily watching Jim Cross and another man who were gossiping together. Deegan poured out for himself a glass of whisky and then remained with it in his hand for so long a time that Jim asked him what was wrong.

"Seems as I've lost all taste for liquor," he said in answer. "I guess it ain't strong enough."

"Not strong enough?" cried Jim. He came across and looked at the glass Deegan was holding. "Why," he cried, "that's stiff enough for all sakes—there ain't much water in that."

"There ain't none," said Deegan and handed it to him. "You drink it. I'm that hot inside whisky don't seem to fizz on me a little bit."

He went outside, muttering to himself and impatiently walking up and down. He was still wandering restlessly from the verandah to the saloon and back again, when Mrs. West returned and came straight up to him.

"I've been thinking," she said. "Briscoe must not go too long without drink or he may get beyond us. It is a long time since his last outbreak and they say he is to

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marry after freeze-up. So when he is in town again, let me know."

"Yes, ma'am," said Deegan, and added to himself as he watched her go: "She's awful down on that boy—I wonder why? But after all, a bit of a spree never did any one any harm."

Accordingly Deegan kept a sharp look out and when in a day or two he heard that Briscoe was in town again he at once hurried to Mrs. West.

"He does not come here to dinner now, does he?" said Mrs. West thoughtfully when she heard this.

"Maybe he's scared—thinks we might make him drunk again," suggested Deegan scornfully.

"Possibly," agreed Mrs. West, thinking that the sneering suggestion was probably very near the truth. "Now go into the saloon and bet Cross or one of those men ten dollars that Briscoe will not dare enter your saloon now he's to be married."

"Bet what?" said Deegan, staring. "Besides, likely he will, and I thought that's what you was after."

"Oh," she cried impatiently; "how stupid you are. Go and do as you are told."

He went to fulfil her bidding, though still rather puzzled, and she hastily tidied herself and went out. In a few moments she saw Briscoe and managed so as to meet him face to face. She held out her hand with an expression of surprise and he could not help stopping to speak to her. She soon managed to have him talking freely, for she asked him many questions. She drew him on skilfully and mentioned with gentle reproach that he seemed to have quite forgotten her; and then she inquired why he had not been to the hotel for his dinner.

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"Oh, I had something before I started," he answered.

"I thought you would come in to tell me how Annie was and how things were progressing," repeated Mrs. West, and returned to the point once or twice till he felt quite uncomfortable and convinced that he had behaved rather badly—more especially as he would not admit even to himself the secret mistrust which had kept him away from the vicinity of the saloon. She had so much to say and so many questions to ask that it seemed only natural they should turn in as they reached the hotel and sit down in the verandah. By now he was interested in their talk and she had little difficulty in drawing him on to speak more intimately of his affairs. She knew there is no quicker or easier way to win a lover's confidence than to speak well of the beloved one, and so she praised Annie till Briscoe wondered how he could ever have felt even vague suspicions of so charming a woman. He remembered that he had determined to avoid both her and the hotel and he felt keenly that this had been weak and silly. He blushed slightly and was glad Mrs. West could not possibly have guessed his mistrust of her. The remembrance of this feeling embarrassed him when she again smilingly reproached him for his neglect.

"You see, there was the harvest," he explained. "I was helping Mr. Leigh, and there was my own little bit of crop to cut, too."

"It was only that you were busy, then?" said Mrs. West.

"It was such an awful rush," he replied, evading the direct point to avoid a lie.

"I am very glad," she said, looking full at him. "You see—I was afraid I had vexed you."

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"Vexed me? Oh, I say, Mrs. West," he cried boyishly.

"Of course, if you were too busy it's different, and I'm very glad. But I was afraid I had vexed you by giving you that whisky—and I was so sorry. You know we old people take an interest in young folk and like to be on good terms with them—it seems as though we were living our lives over again and that would be *so* nice, wouldn't it? But I am very glad you were not vexed about that whisky."

"Oh, not at all," he answered confusedly—"though, of course, I must be more careful now. I am going to turn strict teetotaler," he added with a desire to confide in her that she might see he was not annoyed in any way.

"You are very wise," she said smilingly, and added with an appearance of carelessness: "That is Annie's advice, I suppose; or one might say her orders?"

"Oh, no," he answered, a little surprised at the inference, and a little annoyed at it, too. "I thought it right, that's all. I haven't even told her."

"Then I shouldn't if I were you. You see, I am older and understand, but she might think it—well, weakness, perhaps."

"Oh, I don't think so," he said hastily, flushing a little.

"Perhaps not, perhaps not. Only she has such an intense hatred of anything like weakness.

"I know that," he admitted.

"You see, she might call it cowardice," continued Mrs. West; "not understanding that it is really prudence."

Briscoe looked a little vexed and moved impatiently.

"It isn't that," he said after a pause; "only I don't choose, that's all."

"Exactly what I said," she cried. "Deegan said you

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were scared so badly you would never dare enter a saloon again. He told Jim Cross that."

"Did he?"

"I told them it was foolish to talk in that way. Of course, if you have decided to keep away, it is very wise; but I know you will act as you think best."

"Of course I shall. What did they say to that?"

"Oh, Deegan said—these Americanisms are so odd, I think—he said he thought just the same, only different. He bet Cross ten dollars you would never dare to take a drink of whisky again in his saloon for the rest of your life."

"By George, he shall lose that, anyhow," cried Briscoe, and sprang to his feet.

"That would be rather fun," said Mrs. West, laughing; and Briscoe laughed back as he walked quickly into the saloon. As he entered her laughter ceased, and an expression of deepest scorn succeeded it. "The resolution of a man," she said with utter contempt.

She turned away and going into the now empty dining room she hastily took a bottle of whisky and filled two or three glasses from it. Then she waited, watching the door of the saloon. In a little it opened and Briscoe came out with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes. Mrs. West greeted him with a laugh and he laughed, too.

"Deegan was a little surprised, I expect," she observed.

"He won't like parting with that ten dollars," he answered triumphantly.

"And after all," she continued, "you are none the worse."

"Not a scrap," he asserted.

He stood near watching her as she busied herself by

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the tray that held the glasses she had recently filled. The strong odour of the whisky rose up, and his nostrils opened to receive it. He did not seem to pay it any attention, but she noted how his eyes glittered and how his fingers twitched convulsively.

"Oh, dear," she said presently in a vexed tone and feeling in her pocket; "I've mislaid my keys. How stupid. I had them this afternoon, too, while I was talking to Mr. Deegan. I wonder—do you mind asking if he has seen them?"

He hesitated.

"In there?" he asked.

"How should I know?" she retorted crossly. "Oh, I forgot, you were afraid—I'll go myself."

"No, no, I'll go," he said.

He entered the saloon, but he did not return. Inside there began to be the sounds of merriment, of laughing and singing. Outside Mrs. West waited, smiling to herself.

CHAPTER XVII.

YOU ain't lookin' well," said Deegan with concern the following afternoon, as he chanced to meet Mrs. West in the passage near the saloon.

"I did not sleep well," she answered briefly.

"Got a bit of a headache myself," observed Deegan sympathetically. "Cæsar! but it was a terror of a time last night, and I daresay we made row enough."

"How is Briscoe?" she asked.

"Don't know," he answered with a grin. "Say, you have socked it to him all right. Here he comes," he added, and glancing up Mrs. West saw Briscoe slowly descending the stairway.

It was with curious feelings that the two watched the approach of their victim. He came very slowly, gripping the bannister rail hard as though to steady himself, and in his dead-white countenance his fiery eyes burnt as in a fever. At the foot of the stairs he stopped and looked at them. He did not speak and before his steady, half-unconscious gaze the two became embarrassed and their own eyes dropped.

"Well?" said Deegan presently, awkwardly enough, the more so for his attempt to seem at ease. "How goes it? Feel bad?"

"Not well," answered Briscoe.

"I'll go and mix you up something," said Deegan, and turned away into the saloon, unreasonably glad to escape.

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"I wonder," said Briscoe, turning to Mrs. West as the saloon-keeper disappeared, "I wonder why you have ruined me. I never injured you, did I?"

"Ruined?" she answered, trying to laugh. "Oh, nonsense; you will be all right after your marriage."

"There will be no marriage," he replied. "You have shown me I am not fit."

"Oh," she said smoothly, "you feel ill and now you take a morbid—an extreme view. You know—at least—after—all—"

Her fluent words died away as he stood looking at her; it seemed to her that his burning, intent eyes saw into her and all her schemes; through her and past her with immeasurable scorn, understanding her, without bitterness, but with absolute contempt. She wished to speak again; to argue, to cajole, to coax; but the steady, unimpassioned gaze of those direct eyes that shone so bright against the deathly pallor of his face, prevented her. Obstinate she determined to continue facing him; she reminded herself of the wrongs she had suffered.

In a few moments Deegan came hurrying back, in his hands a tray bearing some hot coffee and a piece of apple pie.

"Some folk," he observed proudly, "would have brought you whisky, but I know just how you're feeling. The coffee's near boilin'."

Briscoe took the tray, looked closely at it and then put it down.

"There's brandy in the coffee," he said, but without emotion, with no change in his white face nor any attempt to remove his feverish eyes from Mrs. West.

Deegan blushed like a school-boy.

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"Only a taste," he urged, "the merest hint. You just taste it. It makes me feel real mean to see you look like that."

There was genuine kindness in his voice, and it seemed to touch Briscoe. He raised the coffee to his lips and then set it down with a strong shudder.

"I am afraid I can't," he said. "It wouldn't matter—now. But I am afraid I can't."

He walked on and Deegan followed him uneasily. Mrs. West stood where they left her, reciting to herself the tale of her wrongs. Suddenly Briscoe came back. She looked at him defiantly, for suddenly she was aware she had entirely lost that feeling of contempt she had once held towards him. Now she regarded him almost with fear.

"I wonder just why you wished to ruin me," he said.

She did not answer him. By an effort she still returned his gaze unflinchingly. Denial did not occur to her.

"Do you think it was worth while?" he asked, and without waiting for reply turned and went away again.

The door of Deegan's little office stood open near by, and she went in and sat down, her head resting on her hands. She tried again to fix her thoughts upon the memory of her wrongs, but now this seemed more difficult. Instead, in spite of all her efforts, she remembered Briscoe's pale, despairing face and his last question: "Was it worth while?" Also she seemed to hear quite plainly a woman sobbing in the distance, as she had heard it all that sleepless night.

"Is it worth while?" she said aloud after a long interval, and Deegan answered from the door, where he had been standing for some moments.

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"It all depends, ma'am."

"On what?" she asked.

"On what you want. See now, Mrs. West, ma'am, I know you're in trouble. You just tell me—go shares, so to say. I don't know what it is you're after, but I—" He gave a little gasp, as though something rose in his throat. "Oh," he cried, "I love you; me that's tough and battered and gettin' old and once a tramp. But I love you all the same. Won't you—couldn't you—if you tried?"

She looked at him, a little surprised but gently. She could never realize that he was in earnest. All her mind was occupied with brooding thoughts of her revenge and every other emotion seemed to her unreal.

"No, no," she said; "it's—it's quite impossible, out of the question altogether."

He looked straight at her.

"It ain't," he said. "I don't know myself how awful bad I want you, but it'll have to be sometime."

"Put the idea aside," she answered sadly. "Believe me, I am very sorry; but forget all about it."

"Not me," he answered. He meditated for a time and then continued gloomily. "I wish I could. I've got along without women folk all these years and I don't want to begin now. But it's stronger nor me, a whole heap stronger, and I'm bound to have you." He paused again and then proceeded in the same half-puzzled tone and laying one large hand upon his chest. "There's something here," he said, "that means to have you or burst right up. So you know."

Mrs. West listened to him but hardly understood, nor dreamed with what primitive force this uncouth West-erner loved her. Even to Deegan himself the intensity

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of his passion was half disguised by the amazement where-with he regarded it. It seemed to him a thing apart, a separate growth, whereat he wondered and not understanding it felt that neither could it be controlled.

"You must put away such thoughts," she said, and never dreamed how she encouraged him by her more gentle manner and her apparent forgetfulness of her threat to leave him if he spoke again.

He went away exultant; and even the slight hold he had upon his passion slackened by reason of the hope he thought he saw.

Later on he heard news, and returned to Mrs. West, who still sat where he had left her, almost in the same attitude.

"Mrs. West, ma'am," he said, "Joe Peters, the ticket agent, has been up. He says Briscoe's bought a ticket west—to Vancouver."

"What?" she cried, and sprang to her feet.

"And the parson met him a while back," continued Deegan, "and asked him somethin' about the weddin' and he said there weren't goin' to be no weddin'. And when the parson asked what was on he just said he was goin' west right away, and then he cleared. My idea," continued Deegan confidentially, "is that he's gone crazed—a spree does take a man that way sometimes. Why, I—Good land! what's wrong?"

Slowly Mrs. West had understood his words. She remembered how Briscoe had said to her there would be no wedding. She understood that she had overreached herself and destroyed her hope of revenge by her own too eager anxiety. She knew the agony of his remorse and understood that he was breaking his engagement and

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leaving the country rather than give Annie a husband subject to such a vice. In a moment there came to her the sense of her impotence, her failure. She saw that the revenge wherewith she had planned to strike John Leigh through his daughter had passed them by to crush a man against whom she had no animosity. To her disordered mind this seemed a fresh triumph over her, a fresh injury, another addition to the long list of ills her husband had done to her.

"It's not true," she said hoarsely.

"You bet it is," he answered. "Why, the whole town's just humming with it."

She raised her hands above her head, and in her heart the fountains of her rage broke up and overflowed. Deegan stood before her, but as a nurse lifts aside a naughty child, so she, small and slight, swung the big man from her path. The door was closed, she did not attempt to open it by lifting the latch, but with both hands she began to beat upon the panels, while Deegan watched, too bewildered to interfere. At her first blow, heavy, swinging, with both hands, the door shook on its hinges; at the second, the panel split from top to bottom; at the third, it burst right open. Her clenched hands went through the shattered wood so that she could not easily withdraw them, and the splinters tore the skin so that they bled. Then Deegan came to her side, his lower jaw dropping with his amazement, and she drew back and looked alternately at the shattered panel and her bleeding hands.

"Look," she said, and held them out to him. "What is it?"

"They're hurt," he answered. "It's blood."

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"That is what I want," she said terribly, and he drew back and shuddered, but still watched her with fascinated eyes.

"I don't understand," he said feebly.

She turned sharply on him, furious of aspect, with lifted, bleeding hands, with her single eye blazing in her rage, and before her he drew back and cowered down.

"To ruin him," she said; "to destroy him utterly—to ruin, ruin, ruin him."

"Yes, ma'am," he answered soothingly, in utter bewilderment. "That's it, of course."

"Oh," she cried, "I am so weak—so lonely—I can do nothing."

She dropped into a chair and laid down her head upon the table and wept slow, difficult tears; of hate, of rage, of baffled impotence. At once he sprang to her side.

"Don't," he said. "I can't bear that. I'll shoot him, shall I?"

She only shook her head.

"I mean it," he said. "Shall I shoot him?" he repeated in a whisper as he bent down. His heart hardly beat any faster as he waited for her answer. "I will shoot him," he said, after an interval.

"I want to die, too," she said; "for death is so easy. I want to see him ruined, destroyed, humbled, suffering."

"I understand," he said, and thought he did. "I'll do it."

"I would give my soul," she answered, "to know it done."

His breath came quickly. He leaned across the table. He whispered in her ear.

"If I do—that—will you do what I ask?"

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"Anything," she answered dully, hardly understanding what he said. "Anything, anything," she repeated twice over.

"I'll do it," he said.

She heard him and glanced up quickly.

"Will you?" she asked.

He nodded without speaking, for it seemed to him that words were trivial things. She read the determination in his face—the fierce determination and the keen desire. Their eyes met and neither wavered. She leaned over to him and deliberately she kissed him on the mouth.

He leaped to his feet, all his blood afire.

"I would do murder for that," he said fiercely.

"But not shooting," she repeated, "for I want to see it all."

"I'll fix him, I'll ruin him," said Deegan and nodded to her. "Anything, mind; anything, you said."

"Whatever you ask," she affirmed.

They looked at each other in silence, and then Mrs. West flung back her head and laughed because she could not weep. But though she did not know it, here was other matter for laughter. It was Arthur Briscoe whom Deegan had twice seen her cajole; it was the news of Briscoe's departure that had caused this outbreak, and so it was Briscoe of whom Deegan now thought and whose ruin he believed the object of her desire. As to his past jealousy of John Leigh, now he hardly remembered that at all. But to Mrs. West, Briscoe was an unconsidered puppet and she thought alone of her husband. Thus they were at cross-purposes, neither even considering the possibility of confusion.

"I'll put the job through in short time," said Deegan

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and left the room. Soon she heard the galloping of his horses as he drove away. She sat still, staring stonily before her, occasionally wiping her lips, and in her mind thoughts that burned like the fires of hell.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN Canada one does not often walk, but this time, Briscoe, though his horse still stood in the hotel stable, resolved to travel back to his shanty on foot.

It had been his original intention to take the western train that same day, writing briefly to Annie to inform her of his determination, his reason, and his sorrow. But in spite of his indifference and pre-occupation and his desire to get away as fast as possible, he found it necessary to make one more visit to his shanty and therefore had been obliged to postpone his departure till the next day.

He walked on steadily, oddly indifferent to everything, his mind conscious, indeed, of the magnitude of his loss and his disgrace, but too stunned to realize fully his own intentions. It seemed to him that the world, and all that made life worth living had slipped away from him, and everything had become of minor interest. It can hardly be said that he suffered now, for the extremity of the mental anguish through which he had passed had proved its own anodyne. For the same reason he felt now no anger against Deegan or Mrs. West, though there had been moments when he had planned to destroy them both. But now he only recognized that he was not fit to marry Annie and that therefore he must go away and never see her again. He was determined he would not see her—not even to say “good-bye.” That was the one coherent

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thought in his mind, and he did not know he had decided to walk that he might remain longer in her vicinity.

In this mood of indifference Briscoe walked on till he heard horses behind and presently Deegan overtook him. Briscoe was neither surprised nor interested; he glanced up, saw who it was, shuddered a little and plodded on.

"Where are you going?" asked Deegan, reining in his horses so as to keep by Briscoe's side.

"Straight on," was the brief answer.

"Well, jump up and I'll give you a lift," continued Deegan, but Briscoe shook his head. "Reckon you're mad with me?" asked the saloonkeeper.

"Mad? Oh, no," answered Briscoe, and then Deegan pressed him again to accept the proffered lift.

It did not appear to Briscoe that either this or anything else was really worth discussion, so he consented and at once Deegan started off at a rapid rate.

"Head bad?" he asked presently.

Briscoe appeared to consider this question for a little and then answered that he did not know.

"Well, I swan," muttered Deegan uneasily.

He was not quite happy in his mind, but he explained to himself several times that after all no one could be really much the worse for a bit of a spree, and that he obeyed Mrs. West's wishes. It appeared to him that the responsibility rested upon her and that he was justified since what he did was done to serve her. "Anyway, I don't care," he muttered; "what she says, goes; and if me or him gets hurt, that's our look out." He glanced at his silent companion, without animosity but also with determination. With an elaborately careless air he produced a pocket flask.

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"Have some?" he asked. "It'll do you good."

In silence Briscoe took the proffered bottle, smelled it, shuddered, looked at it again, then poured a drop into the palm of his hand and examined it long and closely.

"What's that for?" asked Deegan, staring.

"It is so little to give so much for," answered Briscoe, abstractedly.

"There's a dollar's worth there, anyway," said Deegan, wondering what was meant.

"A dollar's worth," repeated Briscoe. "I gave my soul for it; my soul and her."

"Well, take a drink, anyway," suggested Deegan, who found these remarks beyond his comprehension.

"I think I would rather not, thank you," said Briscoe. He relapsed into his former attitude, sitting crouching with his head between his hands.

"Guess he's crazy still," muttered Deegan, and partly to relieve his feelings and partly to prevent Briscoe from alighting he began to travel faster.

He was driving two colts that were but half broken, and now he began occasionally to touch them with his whip till their trot changed to a gallop. He was a good driver, and he kept them both well in hand, but the light buggy swayed and jumped with the speed. Briscoe still sat in the same attitude, apparently unaware of the excessive pace, nor did he show any sign of consciousness when they left the main track and branched off to one side. In spite of the swaying and jerking of the buggy he made no attempt to hold on, so that once or twice Deegan wondered whether he would not be thrown out, but for that he did not relax his speed. At last Briscoe spoke.

"Why are you going this way?" he asked, as though

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recognizing for the first time that they had not kept to the proper trail.

"It's as good as any other," answered Deegan with a sidelong look at him, and Briscoe seemed to find the answer satisfactory.

"You are driving fast," he said again as Deegan dashed headlong down a ravine and then flogged the horses up the other side with barely diminished speed.

"Are you afraid?" asked Deegan.

"Why, no," answered Briscoe, and it almost seemed as though the question amused him. "This is the way to Jim Cross's place," he said suddenly.

"That's where we're goin'," said Deegan abruptly.

"He's a bad lot," said Briscoe thoughtfully; "so we'll go quick."

He leaned over and took deliberately the whip and reins from Deegan's grasp. Then he stood up in the buggy and began to flog the colts, till half mad with terror and pain, with heads down and ears laid back, they tore on at their utmost speed. The light buggy bounded behind them, both wheels leaving the ground for yards at a time; so that Deegan had to hold with both hands to keep his place. Still Briscoe stood upright, balancing himself by a miracle and continually urging on the almost maddened animals. Deegan wondered how long it would be before the inevitable crash, his face went just a little pale and he was glad that at least if Briscoe broke his neck it would be by his own fault. He set his teeth firmly and waited.

"There's Jim Cross's place," said Briscoe, stooping towards him and then again plying his whip.

Clinging to the buggy with firmest grip and expecting every moment to see the end of this mad gallop, Deegan

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could just make out at some distance before them a group of buildings fenced in with barbed wire. It lay right in their path, for the trail they were following led straight there. With a sudden access of fear Deegan shouted to slow down. For only answer Briscoe used his whip again, still standing upright, wonderfully preserving his balance on the buggy that now progressed only by bounds, and still in silence he urged on the furious horses. Deegan wondered whether to try to snatch the reins from him. But that would certainly mean catastrophe; and Deegan had an odd superstitious feeling that he wished the accident he certainly foresaw to be Briscoe's own act.

"Can't be my fault," he muttered, "if he's driving. Now it's comin'." As he spoke he shut his eyes and thought of Mrs. West.

The farm was now very near, and in the yard a man was excitedly running and shouting to them to stop. The house, a low building with a sod roof, was built against a little knoll that here rose abruptly from the generally level prairie. On one side of it was a granary, on the other a stable; the granary standing away by itself, the stable built, like the house, against the knoll from which part of its space had been hollowed out. The whole was enclosed in a barbed wire fence that showed but one narrow gap where the trail ran through, and even this was partly closed by the branch of a tree that lay across it.

Swiftly came the buggy, the maddened horses still urged on to yet greater efforts by Briscoe's stinging whip. Without slackening speed for even one moment he drove them straight at the gap, the buggy swaying from side to side as it neared a passage where an inch to this hand or to that must mean immediate catastrophe. But as by a

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miracle the wheel just grazed one post, the tree branch was smashed aside, and the buggy still retained its balance as the smoking horses drew up at the door of the shanty and stood there, trembling violently.

"Runaway?" asked Jim Cross, coming up, considerably surprised to see them safe.

"No," said Briscoe.

"No?" cried Cross. "Then I reckon it was suicide."

"I guess," answered Briscoe and jumped down to the ground.

"Now," cried Deegan, who hitherto had been busily occupied in feeling himself all over as though to make sure that he was really unhurt; "now perhaps you'll explain what your little game is?"

"What's yours?" answered Briscoe, moodily, and the question silenced the other.

Cross and Deegan busied themselves with the colts and Briscoe watched them. Then suddenly Deegan turned to him again, his face red with anger.

"Curse you," he cried passionately; "you might have killed us both."

"Then there would have been two blackguards the less in the world," retorted Briscoe, and turning he walked into the shanty and sat down there in his old attitude, his head between his hands.

"What's it all mean, anyway?" asked Cross.

"Means there's going to be trouble," said Deegan furiously. "I'll let no Britisher play it on me like that."

Before there had been a certain amount of hesitation in his mind, he had felt vaguely ashamed, and so now he was secretly glad to find some reason to hold resentment against Briscoe. Before he had had to stifle a feeling

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that he was attempting to ruin one who had never injured him in the least; now he said to himself that he had barely escaped with his life, even that Briscoe had deliberately tried to kill him, and he tried to think himself justified in adopting any means of retaliation. He muttered to himself with exaggerated anger as he unhitched the colts and found in their distressed condition fresh reason for his rage.

"Tries to kill me and ruin my two best colts," he growled. "I'll show him, I'll let him know."

He placed the two colts in the stable and in walking back to the house he noticed that everything seemed to be in unusually good order. Cross had a yoke of oxen and these were fastened to a wagon with before them enough hay and water to last for a day or two. Even a few melancholy looking hens were rejoicing over an extra supply of grain; and a couple of pigs were doing their best to dispose of two days' allowance in one glorious feed. Deegan took in all this and looked inquiringly at his companion.

"Well, you see," said Cross in answer to this look; "the wheat's all stacked and there won't be no thrasher for awhile and I thought I might have a bit of a spree, maybe."

"So you was going into town for a big drunk," interrupted Deegan with a grin; "and fixin' up your stock so as they'd be all right till you was sober again, eh?"

"That's about the size of it," admitted Cross, quite unabashed.

"I thought John Leigh made you swear off."

"Why, that was in the spring," answered Cross rather aggrieved. "I am just in good shape for a spree now. I

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can be in town and drunk to-night, sobering to-morrow and back the next day. See?"

"I see," said Deegan; "but look here."

He went to the back of his buggy and showed there some jars of whisky.

"What's on now?" asked Cross, and coming up he began to pat the jars with little loving gestures.

"I'm after a spree, too," said Deegan.

"Why have you come out here for it then?" asked Cross. "And the young fellow—where does he come in?"

"I'll learn him to try to kill me and ruin my best colts. Do you want as much whisky as you like free of charge all this winter?"

"Do I want all Heaven in a band-box?" returned Cross. "But what are you getting at?"

"If you'll chip in and help me, you shall have all you can drink this winter. I brought this young fellow—"

"Seemed to me rather as though he brought you," interrupted Cross with a grin.

"You quit foolin', Jim Cross," said Deegan resentfully. "I want him—I want him to have a bit of a spree, too—I—"

"Go on. What's back of it all?"

"It's this way," said Deegan but still with hesitation, for he had some difficulty in finding appropriate words that would put a gloss upon his ugly intentions. "He's a pet of Leigh's," he said abruptly.

"A pet of Leigh's eh?" repeated Cross. "I'm on. We'll fix him. What you want is to make him beastly drunk for two or three days, and then to take him round and ask John Leigh what he thinks of him."

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"That's about it," said Deegan slowly. He had not before been aware how mean his intentions would appear when plainly put. Now he saw the thing clearly and faced it, and thought of his reward to be. "That's just it," he said.

CHAPTER XIX

JIM CROSS'S shanty was built of single boards and consequently afforded little protection against the rigours of the Northern winter. Impelled therefore by necessity he had hollowed out the side of the knoll against which he had built. At first he had simply intended this to serve as a store room for potatoes and other roots, but he had enlarged it until now it ran even with the size of the shanty and formed a second room to which he retired at the approach of the cold weather, and which he boasted, not without reason, to be the warmest habitation in the neighbourhood. He had carefully boarded the sides and roof, which was supported by two stout beams, and it formed a by no means uncomfortable apartment. There was a stove in it and, by considerable effort, he had managed to carry the piping out above so that he could keep a fire going. He had also cut a narrow opening through the side of the knoll, boarded it and put a pane of glass at each end so that a little light struggled through. Ventilation, it is to be feared, did not trouble him much. And certainly this chamber, hollowed out of the side of the little hill, had the supreme merits of coolness in summer and warmth in winter; no matter how strongly the north wind blew, it never penetrated there.

In the outer room, the shanty proper, Briscoe now sat quietly with his elbows resting on a small table that stood

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by the window and near the cooking stove. Over his head were two or three shelves holding a collection of Cross's possessions. Opposite was the bunk, formed of planks fixed against the wall and luxuriously provided with half a dozen blankets. Besides the chair that Briscoe sat on, a milking stool and the stump of a tree provided a superfluity of seats, and there were also two packing cases that served indifferently as chairs or tables. On one of them now stood all Cross's crockery, carefully washed up, he having thought it desirable to do a little cleaning before starting for his projected spree. On the walls were several sketches from illustrated papers, now nearly obliterated by fly-marks, and a broken looking-glass. The whole interior made up as dirty and untidy a shack as could be found within fifty miles. Some men keep their places tidy enough, but Cross was not of their number.

For some minutes Briscoe remained alone, and, still possessed by the feeling of utter indifference that had lately held him, he sat silently waiting, making no attempt to leave or to pursue his interrupted journey. He was not exactly thinking; he was simply conscious of his misery and of his folly and he cared nothing except that the past was unalterable and unforgettable.

Presently the other two men came in and Cross placed very carefully the jars of whisky in a corner of the room, except one which he put on the table with two cups and a tin pannikin.

"Now we are ready," he said with satisfaction, his eyes twinkling. "Fire away, boys."

"Now, Briscoe," said Deegan, pushing up one of the packing cases, affording a better seat than either the milking stool or the tree stump.

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"What is it?" asked Briscoe without moving.

"Why, this," cried Cross, tapping the whisky jar and beaming with good temper and anticipated happiness. "Get a move on you, young fellow."

"We are going to have a high old time," announced Deegan; "a regular old time spree."

"A spree?" repeated Briscoe, looking up.

"That's what. A regular good high old time."

"I see," said Briscoe slowly. "A jolly spree."

"A real jolly spree," agreed Cross.

"A thoroughly enjoyable happy pleasant time all together," continued Briscoe in the same level passionless tones.

"That's what," cried Cross, who already had had a drink or two and was still beaming with good temper. But Deegan looked rather puzzled and uneasy.

"Now for a real good time, boys," cried Cross again, after he had helped himself to another drink. "Now we'll enjoy ourselves and to blazes with machine agents and gophers and mortgages and everything else. A real good time," he repeated, banging the table for emphasis.

"Right you are," said Briscoe, loudly. "Here's for a beginning."

He leaned back in his chair, and picking up half a dozen plates dashed them on the floor so that they broke into little pieces. The other two men stared at him with open mouthed amazement, that changed to indignation as he put out his hand towards a jug near.

"Here, hold on," they cried together, and Cross continued angrily: "Them's all I've got. What are you playin' at, anyway?"

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"Having a spree, of course," said Briscoe. "Oh, I know the correct procedure. This comes next."

He took up a pan and began to beat it on the corner of the table, making a hideous noise and denting in the bottom till Cross snatched it from him with a volley of oaths.

"That's a brand new pan," he cried furiously.

"Aren't we having a spree?" asked Briscoe, and taking the piece of looking-glass from the wall he dashed it against the stove, shivering it into fragments.

"Look here," said Cross appealingly, turning to Deegan; "you take this lunatic back to town, or I won't have a thing left—and, young fellow, this will cost you ten dollars."

"Not a cent," retorted Briscoe. "It's a spree, so it's the regular thing. Have you ever seen a spree where everything movable was not broken? Oh, I'm not green at this game, am I, Deegan?"

He looked about him with the undiminished gravity that had characterized him all through and it was evident that he contemplated further action. His two companions stared at him with a bewilderment too deep for utterance or movement.

"But—" cried Cross, and then stopped and looked to Deegan for help. "Here, stow it," he cried suddenly, as he thought Briscoe about to begin again. He rubbed his head with an air of complete stupefaction and then exclaimed in sudden triumph as he thought of a conclusive argument. "That's so, but you ain't drunk. Doggone you, you ain't drunk."

"I know I'm not," said Briscoe. "Should you think it all right if I were? Oh, what folly and I the biggest fool

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of all. Cross, you think it silly to smash pots sober, why not as silly to do it drunk?"

"Well," said Cross, still staring at him and ready for the next outbreak; "it seems sort of natural when you're drunk; I reckon all the boys do it then."

"Ay," said Briscoe slowly; "all of us—and some of us hearts instead of cups. So I thought I would do it sober and see how it looked."

"Oh, it's a fool's game sober," said Cross with decision; "and you want to stow it." He helped himself to more whisky.

"It is a fool's game," said Briscoe; "and I will stow it. So long."

He moved towards the door, intending to go, but Deegan stepped before him.

"Not yet," he said; "stop a while longer."

Deegan's manner was awkward and embarrassed, but yet determined. Briscoe did not answer, but eyed him with anger and a keen bitterness.

"Get out of the way," he said.

"You ain't goin' till you're as drunk as the next man," said Deegan slowly.

"You've helped me make a beast of myself twice," said Briscoe; "and that's enough. This time you shall be the swine you wish without my help." He spoke with an angry bitter contempt that brought a flush to Deegan's cheek, and then he added abruptly: "Let me pass or—"

"I came here," said Deegan with slow deliberation, "to see you drunk, and drunk you've got to be."

"Get out of my way."

"Not I," said Deegan. "I'll keep you here if I have to

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fasten you up with the logging chain and pour the whisky down you by a funnel."

Briscoe looked at him in surprise; puzzled and angry. He did not understand the other's motive, but there was about him a resolute air that showed he meant what he said. Deegan was much the stronger man so that if it actually came to blows the odds were on his side; but Briscoe had all the average Englishman's instinctive reliance on the law.

"You don't dare," he said contemptuously. "I would make you smart if you tried anything of that kind on. Are you so fond of gaol that you want to go back?"

"Oh, that don't work," retorted Deegan angrily, for the gibe had touched a tender spot. "Who'd believe you if I said we was all on the burst together?"

Briscoe looked a little taken aback at this.

"This is all nonsense," he said after a pause during which the two men eyed each other steadily. "What is it you want?"

"Never you mind. I brought you here for a spree and a spree you shall have, whether you like it or not."

"Are you in this, Cross?" asked Briscoe, turning to him.

"You bet," answered Cross promptly. "You smashed my plates; only manners you should get drunk now."

"Better take it reasonable," urged Deegan.

"Much better," agreed Cross on whom the whisky he had taken was already producing an effect. "Don't want to use the loggin' chain, y'know."

"You didn't mind it a little bit last time," said Deegan again; "and it ain't such bad fun."

"Fun!" cried Briscoe, and with a sudden movement he

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hit Deegan between the eyes and as he staggered at the blow jumped past him to the door. But in a moment the saloon-keeper had recovered his balance. He seized Briscoe by the coat, and then they grappled and rolled over together.

Deegan was much the heavier man and as they fell he was uppermost, but by a sudden movement Briscoe caught him by the collar of his shirt and made a desperate attempt to choke him off. Endeavouring to free himself Deegan rolled to one side, but Briscoe still clung to him with all his strength so that he could hardly breathe. Now the young Englishman was on top but Deegan struggled again, and once more they rolled over, bumping heavily against the table. Hitherto Cross had sat still, watching them stupidly, but now he sprang up, swearing at the top of his voice, and hit Briscoe so heavily across the wrist that his numbed hand opened and Deegan breathed freely again.

"Let me up," he gasped as he recovered his breath, and then in spite of Briscoe's struggles they began hauling him towards the table. For one moment he got his left hand free and with all his force hit Cross clear on the right temple. He fell heavily full length across the packing case and in his fall smashed most of the crockery that was left with resulting and painful damage to his own person. Bellowing with rage and pain he sprang up and kicked Briscoe's feet from under him so that he lost his balance and fell. At once Deegan knelt on him, holding him powerless, and then Cross tied his arms together at the elbows. Then they pulled him up again and forced him into the chair, where Deegan held him down by both shoulders. The two men were breathing heavily, and

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Briscoe stared at them, helpless as he now was, with undiminished defiance.

"Now what are you going to do?" he demanded. "Mind, I'll see that you pay for this."

"Young rat," cried Cross, who was ruefully feeling the damaged portions of his own frame, where the sharp pieces of the crockery had cut him, and at intervals his eye, which was already beginning to discolour. "You'll do the payin' for this," he cried, and shook his hand viciously in Briscoe's face.

"Get the whisky," said Deegan briefly; "we'll finish the job now."

Briscoe did not attempt to speak. He still breathed in heavy gasps from the exertion of the struggle, and in his eyes the cold indifference had scattered before the steady light of his indignation.

"Here y'are," said Cross, handing a full pannikin; "but, Lord, it's a waste of good liquor."

"Put it in his mouth," said Deegan; "if I don't hold him tight, he'll be up again." And the quick flash in Briscoe's eyes supplied sufficient proof of that.

"Drink, you young rat," said Cross; "drink, dodrot you."

Briscoe kept his mouth obstinately shut, his teeth firmly clenched.

"That's his little game, is it?" said Deegan. "Push his head back, now pour it on his lips."

But still Briscoe kept his mouth closed tightly, and the liquor merely ran down his chin and was wasted.

"Sulky, eh?" said Cross. "Cæsar! And to think how many of the boys are just aching for a chance like this, dry all through, some of 'em."

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"We'll soon settle that," said Deegan angrily. "Pinch his nose so as he can't breathe, and when he opens his mouth, pour it down."

"Good for you," said Cross, grinning and did as he was told.

Still Briscoe kept his lips as tightly pressed as before and behind them his teeth clenched with rigour, his jaw set tight. It appeared to him that now he had a chance to retrieve his manhood and he cared little whether he died in the effort or not. A huge weight came upon his chest and it seemed as though his lungs would burst. He made little convulsive movements with his limbs, there was a throbbing in his brain, and the veins at his temples stood out. The pressure became intolerable; he was not capable of connected thought, but he was aware of Annie and of his late disgrace and his resolution still held. He was hardly conscious, his head swam, his face began to go black and his eyes to roll wildly. In another second he would have lost consciousness and then his lips must have opened.

"Gosh, he'll die," cried Cross, suddenly afraid and drew back.

Briscoe opened his mouth instinctively and breathed again, nearly choking with the sudden change. His mouth hung open and he took in the air with short gasps; and Deegan watched him with sour anger.

"You take the first trick," he said; "but I'm bound to see this thing through. You'll stop here till you're reasonable. Jim, you get your loggin' chain and some rivets and I'll fix him so he won't get it off without a file."

"Never mind worryin' about the loggin' chain," sug-

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gested Cross. "Shove him inside and let him stay there. I want a drink; I'm that dry I can hardly speak."

"Would he be safe?"

"Safe? I reckon. Unless he can dig his way through thirty feet of solid earth. That's dug out of the side of the hill, that is, and there ain't no way out except that door. I reckon we can fix that."

"Well, then, in you get," said Deegan, and together the two men pushed their prisoner inside the inner room.

"And when you've come to your senses again," said Cross, "you shall have all the whisky that's left, and I reckon that won't be a great deal, maybe."

"You don't have nothin' else," said Deegan, surveying his prisoner with sullen temper. "By thunder, young fellow, you shall have whisky and nothin' but whisky. Mind, I'm out to see this through."

"You will see more than you will like before you are through with it," returned Briscoe. "Remember this is not the United States—there is law here."

"You listen to me," continued Deegan, unheeding the interruption. "I'll tell you what I'm after. You shan't have a thing that don't taste of whisky. By Gosh, I'll make you so you can't live without it. You shall have whisky in your tea, whisky in your bannock, whisky in your water; if I give you porridge I'll put whisky in it, if I fry you bacon I'll put whisky on it. I'll have you so that everything you get tastes of whisky; in a little while I'll have you soaked with it, through and through, so that you won't be able to live without it. Yes, sir; whisky you shall have and nothin' but whisky, and we'll see who is best man and who comes out of this deal on top. You hear me?"

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"Oh, get out," said Briscoe; "and think of the gaol ahead of you."

For a moment Deegan stood, surveying the other with a deep and sullen fury. Then he went banging the door behind him and Briscoe was left to his own reflections.

CHAPTER XX

THE disappearance of Deegan was a cause of some wonder in the little town, but when Mrs. West, who undertook the management of the hotel in his absence, was asked where he had gone she simply replied that he had been suddenly called away on business. Few believed her, but after all there was no one sufficiently interested to pursue the subject and none to connect, with Deegan's absence, Briscoe's failure to carry out his expressed determination of returning to take the next westward train. "On the bust," was the laconic explanation usually given when the name of either man was mentioned.

For the first two days of Deegan's disappearance Mrs. West went about her work much as usual though now beneath her still preserved outer mask of indifference, the tumult of her spirits appeared more clearly. Several times she was heard muttering to herself, and her patience that before had seemed unending now broke down occasionally even on trivial points. In truth she was consumed between two fires, her anger at her husband and her dread of Deegan's errand. In the night she would awake from dreadful dreams; and sometimes she seemed to hear plainly the sobbing of a woman in great grief and sometimes again lips meeting hers in another kiss. Nevertheless she still fanned the lurid flame in her heart and obstinately determined to make no effort to check Deegan or to warn John Leigh. For that the

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saloon-keeper had gone with hostile intent against him she never doubted, only wondering what form it would take. "He went at my bidding," she said to herself a hundred times a day, and each time set her teeth more firmly.

On the afternoon of the third day Mrs. West was told that Miss Annie wanted to see her. She went out slowly to where Annie waited. Apparently she was unconcerned enough but really she was all prepared to hear of catastrophe. "Has he killed him?" she said to herself, and for all her fierce anger, could not prevent the fear that seized her at the thought. Expecting such tidings, her mind braced to receive them, she walked quietly with steady step and unchanged countenance, and held out her hand to Annie with a friendly look.

"Oh, Mrs. West," cried the girl; "I do so want to see you."

"Oh," said Mrs. West slowly, but now with a relaxation of the tension that had held her before; for she saw that Annie's manner was of trouble surely but not of tragedy. "Is anything wrong? 'Come into the office. Mr. Deegan is away."

Obediently Annie followed her into the little room at the back, and inside it they turned and faced each other. It was an odd attitude they both assumed, for it had in it something of a hostile suggestion as each stood upright and looked straight at the other. But that did not occur to Annie. Though she wondered vaguely why Mrs. West watched her so closely, she herself saw only the familiar and longed-for friend of her own sex; and the thought of her trouble overwhelmed her so that she could not speak.

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"And Mr. Leigh, how is he?" asked Mrs. West.

"Quite well, thank you," said Annie mechanically, thinking how to begin her story.

"Indeed," said Mrs. West, and felt at once bitter disappointment because as yet he had suffered nothing from her, and greatest relief that he was still unhurt in body and estate.

"Mrs. West," began Annie, and then paused. "Mr. Briscoe," she said and then stopped again. Suddenly she burst into tears and, springing forward, put her arms round Mrs. West and leant her head against her and poured out her sorrow in long quivering sobs—and in the silent room Mrs. West heard with reverberating sound the soft continued sobbing. Against her heart lay Annie's head, around her pressed Annie's arms, and Mrs. West thought of those sad far distant tears she had wept when first she knew her husband's fault. It was strange how distinctly she remembered. It was as though she lay again in her mother's arms, sobbing out her very heart, while in the Court House opposite her husband's disgrace and hers was displayed for all to see. Almost it seemed to her that these were her own sobs she heard so plainly; and involuntarily her arms closed round Annie and she held her tightly to her, and murmured soft comforting words. She quite forgot that this was an interloper, the child of one who had usurped her place, and when she did remember, it amazed her that none the less the fire of her anger still remained dull and cold.

"He has gone away from me," said Annie piteously, and Mrs. West, to her own astonishment, comforted the girl gently. At last, in sentences still broken by deep

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sobs, Annie told how she had had a letter from Briscoe bidding her farewell and how it was five days since she had seen him.

"The letter only came to-day," she said. "I wondered so where he was. Then it came in the mail and by now he is on the Pacific coast and I shall never, never see him again."

"And the reason?" said Mrs. West moodily. "It is better so."

"It isn't," cried Annie. "What do I care for his reasons. And how do you know?"

"His last outbreak is common property," replied Mrs. West, and saw how Annie winced. Very keenly Mrs. West remembered how that outbreak had been caused.

"I don't care," said Annie, and then she repeated again: "I don't care." But her face was pale and her sobbing had quite ceased.

"Do you know what it would mean," said Mrs. West, and to her each word was bitter as gall; "to have a drunken husband that you say you do not care?"

"I do care," cried Annie. "Oh, it is horrible. Yes, I do care. But now it is too late, for I promised and I have his own ring. And I know he is so sorry."

"Oh, they are always sorry," said Mrs. West with increased bitterness. "But it is too late after you are married."

"It is the same thing," said Annie. "I promised and am I to back out because I find faults in him?"

"But such a fault."

"He is very sorry. And I promised."

"Girl," cried Mrs. West; "you do not understand. You do not know the awful, the infinite degradation. Rather thank God for a fortunate escape than dream of calling

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him back. Think of it; to be bound body and soul to a man you cannot respect, much less love. To see the man whom you swore to honour, making himself lower than the beasts; to see your own the mock of all decent folk; to see your heart trampled out in filth and mud." Mrs. West's voice rose shrill with agony, quavered and broke; then resumed. "Imagine perhaps being struck by him." She paused again and added in a yet lower tone, "Think of his kisses, loathsome with drink."

"I am so sorry," said Annie. Tears ran down her cheeks again and she held out both her hands. "I think we are two miserable women," she said.

"What do you mean? What do you mean?" cried Mrs. West in surprise and sudden fear.

"I understand," said Annie. "And, oh! I am so sorry for you because I know how you have suffered."

Mrs. West did not answer, but it came to her that her suffering had never made her sorry for any other person. It seemed strange to her that sorrow should make the heart tender as it had made hers hard. She wished that Annie would show some anger against the man who had left her so. Suddenly she was aware that Annie's sympathy had been strangely sweet to her, that now there were tears on her cheeks also. She brushed them off impatiently, determined that she would not give way. She called up all her resolution.

"Never mind me," she said harshly. "Would you dare marry him knowing what you know? If so, you deserve the misery you will most certainly suffer."

"I think," said Annie, hesitatingly; "I think I would do even that—if I knew he really loved me. But I would make him prove he loved me by quite giving it up."

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Then I would marry him when I was quite certain he was cured."

"Such men are never cured."

"Oh, yes; they are. I should say he must prove his sorrow and that he loved me as well as I loved him by giving it up entirely, and that I must wait till I was sure he had. Then I should know he loved me, and how beautiful it would be to know that he had conquered for my sake."

"Dreams," said Mrs. West, watching with understanding the glow on Annie's cheeks. "Dreams with bitter wakening. He would break out again."

"I would not let him," answered Annie. "I know Arthur. He is very good, if he is weak in some things. I would strengthen him."

"Weak? And yet you love him?"

"I think—I think perhaps that is why. It is so strange that he who is so strong is yet so weak. I would always guard and help him. And how could I love him if I were not prepared to risk and suffer for him?"

"Love has no such obligation," said Mrs. West moodily, and thought of her own past life.

"I would make him prove himself for seven years—that would test the reality of his feelings."

"Seven years," said Mrs. West, and remembered that John Leigh had been proved for twenty.

"Yes," said Annie; "but in his letter he says that I must loathe him, and so he has gone away and what can I do? For I do not want to loathe him but to love him and to help him."

"I do not know," said Mrs. West and then asked abruptly: "Are you not angry with him?"

"Angry? No, I am sorry."

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"Do you know that the other night when he was drinking here that he showed your photograph to all the men; that it was handed round among them and talked and laughed about?"

Annie's face went very white and she swallowed a sob in her throat. She made no answer.

"Did you know that?" asked Mrs. West again.

"Why did you tell me?" asked Annie in return.

"That is nothing," said Mrs. West, "to the things you must endure if you marry such a man. Child, let him go."

Annie turned away and stood by the window. Now she had no further help in tears. She stood still and silent and very deep in thought. Mrs. West watched her, and wondered to find that she had been dissuading the girl from the marriage for which she had previously plotted and planned. This struck her as very curious and she tried to trace the steps by which it had come about. She endeavoured to reconcile her conduct and could not. Nor was it possible for her to do so since in her raged the eternal conflict between good and evil, and it needed all her stiff necked resolution to keep alive her ancient desire for revenge. She saw Annie's agony and it no longer seemed to her to make amends for her own. It occurred to her that forgiveness is always possible, even to seventy times seven. The phrase rang in her mind.

"If," said Annie slowly; "if he is really sorry and proves it—then I will forgive him."

"And if not?"

"Then I will forgive him and I must always love him, but I will not marry him."

"Do you know," said Mrs. West slowly; "that while

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he was drinking that night he kissed Aggie Hayes and swore that he loved her alone."

Now this was a lie that Mrs. West had made to try her, but Annie believed.

"Oh, oh," she cried. Her fists clenched. Her eyes flashed. She cried out again in anger and bitter pain.

"That you cannot forgive," cried Mrs. West. She drew herself up to her full height, she raised her hands above her head, her words and accent were triumphant. "Not that," she said; "no woman could."

"It was very wrong of him," said Annie simply; "but for everything he did that night, I can and will forgive him—if only he proves his sorrow and himself."

"You have no spirit," cried Mrs. West in a wild outburst of anger; "that is only cowardice, weakness, folly; why, at that rate you could forgive anything."

"Anything," repeated Annie softly.

"Folly!" cried Mrs. West.

"I am afraid perhaps it is weak," said Annie, thoughtfully; "but you see I do love him and he must have a second chance."

"I won't," cried Mrs. West; "never, never, never."

And still crying "never," she ran from the room.

"Poor woman," said Annie to herself, "she must have suffered terribly. Perhaps I shall, too. But at least he shall have another chance."

She waited a little and when Mrs. West did not appear she sent messages to her, for she sympathized with her deeply and would have comforted and helped her if she could. But to the first message Annie received no reply at all and to her second only a brusque word that she would not come. So presently Annie drove back to her father's farm; and from an upper window Mrs.

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West watched her and planned against her malign things and hoped that Deegan had brought about some great evil to John Leigh. And the softness that had touched her heart receded quite, and bitterness and hate swelled up instead and possessed her utterly.

Yet perhaps not utterly, for now, once at least, had forgiveness seemed possible to her.

CHAPTER XXI

FOR more than an hour Mrs. West sat in the window of her room, looking intently down the trail, long after Annie had vanished from sight; and her anger burned furiously against this girl who had spoken of patience, of forgiveness. "Canting little humbug," she muttered; "but she will suffer for it." It pleased her to think of the sorrows and calamities that must overwhelm Annie if she did marry Arthur Briscoe, and beneath that imagining she glowed fierce with anger lest of a truth he might thereby be redeemed—and thus forgiveness prove a better way than revenge.

So she sat motionless till presently there was a knock at her door and Pierre, the little Frenchman, called to her that a man had come into town bringing a note from Deegan.

"I shall be down in a minute," she answered aloud and asked herself what news that note might bring. Now she felt no fear, no misgiving, but only joy at the approaching consummation of her revenge; and she felt, too, an added joy that Annie, returning to the farm, would meet there the event of which this note brought the news. "Now we'll see if the girl has time to think of redeeming her drunkard," she muttered with bitter scorn; "now she may find something nearer home to occupy her."

She went quietly downstairs and on the table in

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Deegan's little room found a note addressed to her in his large and painful writing. With dry eyes, her tears burnt away by inward fire, she opened it and read:

"Dere Madam,

I am here and I have got young Art. Briscoe and dere Madam I am filling him that full of whisky he will be a true sponge dere Madam when I am threw with him which will I hope meet your vewe and trusting that will prove satisfactory and don't you forget what I am in this for dere Madam

Very respectfully

Thomas Deegan."

"Briscoe?" cried Mrs. West as she finished; "what does he mean?" She read the note again and understood gradually that Deegan must have misunderstood her and have acted against Arthur Briscoe instead of against John Leigh.

In silent rage she crumpled up the note and threw it on the floor, and then picked it up and read it again. "As though I cared about that boy," she muttered; "and what does he mean by 'don't you forget what I'm in this for.' " She puzzled over the phrase for a moment, for already she had forgotten those passionate words that had meant so much to Deegan. She had uttered them in a frenzy of rage and had hardly thought of them again. Her anger against John Leigh burned so fiercely that she found it only natural others should hate with her; and knowing how Deegan resented the threatened attack on his licence she supposed that to be his main motive.

She puzzled a little, then dismissed the matter as one not greatly interesting her. Taking up a pen she hastily wrote a note to Deegan, telling him briefly that she cared nothing about Briscoe, whom he had better release at

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once. She added that Briscoe had neither injured her nor Deegan himself, and said finally that she would drive out herself the next day. By way of a postscript was a bitter gibe at his supposing she had referred to a "mere boy," and a stinging suggestion that perhaps he had thought it more prudent to attack a "harmless silly child like Arthur Briscoe," than a man like John Leigh.

This note finished she sat for a little thinking and then said aloud: "Filled with whisky, is he?—like a sponge?" With a malignant smile she wrote this:

"To Miss Annie Leigh.

If you really meant what you said, would you like to come to-morrow morning to Mr. Cross's place? There you may see things to interest you and test your sublime theories of forgiveness.

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She went across to the saloon and found there the messenger who had brought the note from Deegan. She bargained with him that he should return at once and deliver with as little delay as possible the two letters she showed him. He was not very anxious to turn out again as it was now getting late, but she offered to pay him liberally and so he agreed.

"The situation," said Mrs. West to herself as she watched him drive away, "when Annie meets her lover to-morrow will be decidedly piquant. We will see if she prates of forgiveness then."

Though Mrs. West had paid her messenger liberally, his horse was very tired and the trails were bad and awkward to find in the darkness that soon came on. The distance was considerable, too, and though he persevered for some time he finally, on reaching the house of a friend, determined to wait there for the morning light. So it

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happened that it was not till breakfast time that Deegan got his note, and not till some time later did Annie receive hers.

"Who's this from?" said Deegan, suspiciously, as the note was handed to him.

"It's from Mrs. West up at your place," answered the messenger. "So long. I must clear. I oughter've brought you that last night; only the trail was so amazin' bad I stopped at Halliday's."

He nodded and drove away to deliver his second note and Deegan stood looking with strange emotions at this letter from Mrs. West, the first he had ever had from any woman except on business matters. He held out the little note on his open palm and looked at it with softened eyes. He glanced round over the broad prairies that lay in the morning sunshine, quite deserted save for the rapidly receding figure of the messenger. All about him lay the new lands, empty now but so full of the possibilities of nations yet to be; and in his hand a little note that stirred in him emotions hitherto unfelt. There was no one to see, but he stepped behind an open stable door and there pressed the note to his lips.

"I'll kiss her next—again," he said fiercely, and thrilled with the anticipation. For a little longer he dreamed and then it occurred to him that he had better open and read. Twice over he read the brief contemptuous sentences; and he understood his blundering and that he had earned not gratitude but scorn. With a bellow of inarticulate rage he ran into the stable, dragged out his reluctant horses that had not yet finished their morning feed, and began hastily to harness them to his buggy.

"Curse the luck," he muttered at intervals; and then,

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"but I'll fix him now, sure thing. Gosh; yes, I'll fix him."

He had no settled plan in his mind for he was too disturbed to think coherently. He knew only that he must find John Leigh immediately and inflict upon him at once the revenge that Mrs. West desired; at one blow satisfying his old animosity and earning the reward she had promised him.

"I'll whip him; sure as shootin', I'll—I'll—" he muttered on to himself as he harnessed the horses, but he did not finish the sentence. Soon he was ready, and he was about to start when he remembered that as yet he had had no breakfast. John Leigh was likely to be a stout antagonist, and Deegan knew he was undertaking no holiday task, so, though reluctantly, he ran into the house. He had made a bannock the day before and half of this he now pushed into his pocket. There was a pot of cold tea standing on the table and from that he snatched a hasty drink. His eye fell upon the nailed-up door and he remembered that he could hardly leave Briscoe prisoner there. "Oh, let him stay and rot," he said impatiently and moved away. Then he remembered that Mrs. West had told him to release the lad. He hesitated for a moment, consumed with impatience to be off, and cursed aloud Cross, who lay in his bunk in a drunken stupor. But Mrs. West's expressed desire and a fear that he might be away some time and mischief happen to Briscoe if he were not released, decided Deegan that he could not leave him. Swearing at the delay he began to tug at the planks that had been spiked across the door to make Briscoe's prison secure. The planks were heavy and carefully fastened and Deegan found he could not move them. He ran outside for an axe, wherewith he

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attacked them furiously, using every exertion to get the door free as soon as possible.

For the past three days Briscoe had been kept in this inner room that was hollowed out from the side of the little hill. A small square hole had been cut in the top of the door and through this with curses at his obstinacy his food had been dropped daily; and true to their expressed intention every morsel was tainted with whisky. To both Deegan and Cross this had seemed an excellent and assured plan of accustoming the recalcitrant Briscoe to the taste and finally breaking down his resistance.

"He must eat and drink," said Deegan with chuckles; "and he'll get that used to whisky he'll take to it like a calf takes to milk. And so he shall if he has to stop there a month."

Then Cross would nod in drunken agreement and shout to Briscoe to come out and have a drink and curse him for a sulky fool when there was no answer.

"It only wants time," Deegan would then repeat with easy confidence. "He ain't gettin' a thing but whisky and it's bound to soak him through and through. He'll be shoutin' for it presently."

And meantime Briscoe, confined within his dark prison, the air heavy with the scent of the spirit the two men outside were always drinking, and the same horrible taint in everything they passed through to him, grew to loathe both taste and smell as something indescribably disgusting, and to regard the idea of drinking it as physically sickening. Sitting thus all day in darkness and solitude he thought much of Annie and wondered if perhaps, some day, in the years to come, she might not forgive him—after he had proved himself.

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Always, whether he sat and thought or paced the room in futile searching for a way to escape, always, in the food that he could not eat, in the drink that he could not swallow, and in the air that he must breathe, continually lay the same horrid taint till he thought that surely he must die from sheer disgust at it.

"Ugh," he said with sick shivers as he tried, impelled by ravening hunger, to eat a piece of bread that he could not swallow for the same all-pervading loathsome taste; "to think I actually liked that unutterably beastly stuff."

Unable to eat in spite of his sick hunger he threw the bit of bread into a corner and then started up, quick with joy, as he heard the blows of Deegan's axe thundering on the door that confined him.

"Rescue," he cried in wild excitement.

Climbing on a box he peered through a little opening in the top of the door and saw to his infinite surprise that it was Deegan who was, with every appearance of eagerness, labouring to release him. Briscoe stood down again and as he listened to the eager blows thundering on the door, he considered within himself what this might mean. He decided that at last Deegan's patience had broken down and that he was abandoning his slow and absurd method of familiarizing his prisoner with the taste of whisky for some more rational process.

"They'll try to pour it down again," he muttered, and his hands tightened and he looked about him for some weapon.

But his two gaolers had been careful to clear the room of anything that might have proved useful to him, and he could find nothing. He was conscious, too, that his

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strength had greatly decreased during these three days of captivity. None the less he braced his muscles for an effort and when presently the blows ceased as the last of the planks came down and then the door itself swung open, he spoke no word but sprang straight at Deegan's throat.

"Hands off," shouted the saloon-keeper and received a blow full on the mouth. "Quit, you little fool," he cried and swung his axe.

But Briscoe, excited, reckless and dreading worse than death further attempts to force drink upon him, still attacked him furiously, twice striking him heavy blows. Deegan endeavoured to disengage himself but could not; another blow struck him so shrewdly that he staggered and nearly lost his balance. He was wild with impatience to get away, Briscoe's furious attack was pressing him severely, and the lad's excitement and ceaseless blows gave little opportunity for any explanation.

"Keep clear," he cried, and then, as Briscoe closed desperately upon him, now still more excited by hope of victory, Deegan swung up his axe and struck down his adversary with a heavy blow upon the head. He fell in the doorway across the splintered wood that had held him prisoner, and lay there motionless. With an oath Deegan flung the axe beside him.

"I didn't want to," he cried as he ran from the house to where his horses waited; "but, Gosh, I just had to. I hope he ain't dead."

He sprang into his buggy and drove furiously away towards John Leigh's farm. At first he drove in silence, caring only to obtain the highest possible speed from his horses, but presently he began to mutter to himself.

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"If that young fool's dead," he muttered; "her and me'll have to skip out over the boundary to the States. Even if—even if there ain't nothin' else by night. God in Heaven, I'm payin' for her. She's worth it though."

CHAPTER XXII

BEFORE daybreak that same morning, after a night even more than usually restless, Mrs. West rose and went down to the stable. Since her arrival in Big End she had learned to do many things that previously had been sealed mysteries to her, and now she had little difficulty in harnessing a pony for herself. She left a note on the kitchen table bidding Pierre do the best he could with the meals, and then drove swiftly away over the broad prairies in the cold, strong air of the morning, that though it made her shiver yet helped to check the fever in her brain.

She drove on swiftly, her eyes fixed straight in front of her, seeing nothing that she passed by, utterly heedless of the glowing dawn that rose to greet her, ere she had gone half way. But she went a little faster now that the light was better, and presently she drove through the gap in the fence into the space before Cross's shanty.

She hitched her pony to a post and wondered at the quiet and deserted air that hung over the little farm. In spite of the barking and indignant dogs that protested loudly at her intrusion, she walked up to the house. Without hesitation she opened the door and went in, and saw there the two men lying, and all about the floor the empty jars of whisky. Cross lay breathing heavily in his bunk, Briscoe, still unconscious, in the doorway of the inner room; and Mrs. West quite naturally included them both in one scornful condemnation.

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"But where can Deegan have gone?" she said in some surprise as she went out again, carefully closing the door behind her.

She stood watching, wondering what the absence of Deegan might mean, and presently she saw some one approaching in the distance. She wondered whether this would be Deegan or Annie, and presently made out that it was the girl, coming in answer to her summons. She watched her approach with a faint yet malign smile.

"Now we shall see," she said aloud, "how theories of forgiveness hold."

The moment Annie drove up she sprang to the ground and ran forward without stopping to fasten up her horse.

"Oh, this is good of you," she exclaimed and tried to kiss Mrs. West, but found herself repulsed with a quick gesture. "Why, what is the matter?" she asked, surprised and hurt.

"You got my note, then?"

"Yes, but what did it mean? It seemed—seemed—" Annie was evidently at a loss for a word and went on abruptly: "I started immediately I got it."

"Did you?" said Mrs. West, indifferently, and added with equal indifference, "Did you happen to see Mr. Deegan or—"

"Why, yes; I passed him going towards our place. He looked funny, upset about something, and I don't believe he even saw me."

"He looked—funny? Was he driving fast?"

"As fast as fast," said Annie. "Why, is anything wrong?"

"Not that I know of," replied Mrs. West, but her voice was low and sombre, for she wondered greatly why

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Deegan drove so fast, and why he had gone without waiting to see her. "I think I must go," she said, and moved quickly towards her buggy.

"Oh, but," cried Annie, following her in some dismay, "what is it? Why did you send for me? Is anything wrong? Why should you hurry?"

"Why should I hurry?" repeated Mrs. West and seemed to meditate upon the point. "I am sure I don't know," she said presently as though reaching a decision. "I will wait."

"That is very nice of you," said Annie heartily.

"Oh, very nice," agreed Mrs. West. "Is your father at home?"

"No, he went to Heddle's with a load of oats this morning, and both the men are teaming potatoes to town. Did Mr. Deegan want to see him?"

"To Heddle's," said Mrs. West with an almost involuntary look of relief on her face. "Then Mr. Deegan will have to wait."

"But why did you send for me here? And what did your note mean?"

Mrs. West looked at her without answering, and there were many thoughts in her mind. She did not speak and presently Annie touched her timidly on the arm.

"I fear you are in great trouble," she said gently. "I am so very, very sorry for you."

"Are you?" said Mrs. West. "Really?" It seemed for just one moment as though her stern and fixed expression relaxed a little. "Yet you have sorrow of your own?"

"Yes," said Annie; "that is why I am sorry for you."

"A foolish baby reason," said Mrs. West, and her face

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hardened once more, dark again with sombre threatening. You won't be long sorry for me. Go and look in the house."

"The house," repeated Annie, with a little startled glance at the building. She looked round her and to her accustomed eyes there seemed now a suggestion of something wrong, of something unusual about the place. Even the dogs seemed quiet and uneasy, and already they had ceased to protest against the appearance of the strangers, whom now they watched as though glad of their company. Near by two pigs were squealing restlessly as though they had not been fed lately, and the stable door hung carelessly open. "What is there in the house?" she asked, and in her sad eyes fear rose behind the sorrow.

"Go and see," said Mrs. West abruptly.

She remembered how years before so she had gone fearfully into a room and found there what Annie would find here. She remembered, too, her bitter indignation and the biting words and reproaches she had used, how contemptuous had been her refusal of help or sympathy, and how she had seen with pleasure her reproaches increasing his remorse. There was perhaps a certain curiosity in her mind as she watched Annie go with slow steps and stand in hesitation before the door.

"Why don't you go in?" said Mrs. West, and there was a sneer in her tone.

Annie looked round in a startled way, for that was the first time she had been conscious of any suggestion of hostility in the older woman's manner. Without answering she lifted the latch, but stood for a moment on the threshold still hesitating. Then she opened the

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door and went in—and the strong odour of the whisky caught her and made her gasp for breath.

"Oh, oh," she cried in misery, for in that pungent odour she realized her worst fears.

"Go in," said Mrs. West, harshly, and Annie looked at her in pathetic surprise, but with mingled fear and resentment, too. Then she went inside and Mrs. West followed her to the doorway.

"That is Jim Cross," cried Annie excitedly as she recognized the senseless figure lying on the bunk. It was as though a note of challenge sounded in her voice.

"And that?" said Mrs. West, and pointed to the doorway of the inner room. It was as though she heard the challenge and accepted it.

"Oh," said Annie, softly; "it is he, it is he." And the hopeless sorrow in her voice touched even Mrs. West—reached even to her excited brain, bewildered with the intensity of one idea.

"You are not the only one, many of us women suffer thus," she said, and hearing her, Annie forgot the suspicion and resentment of the last few moments and took her hand in her own.

Hand in hand the two women stood, gazing at the unconscious form that lay in the shadow of the doorway. Annie's eyes were tearless and in after years she thought of that moment with shuddering and knew that she had not escaped her share of human suffering.

Presently she released her hand and moved forward.

"Where are you going?" cried Mrs. West, and put a detaining touch on her shoulder.

"Only to try—just to try and make him a little more—

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a little less uncomfortable," answered Annie, hesitatingly. "Look how his head hangs down."

"Can you touch him—can you bear to touch him?" cried Mrs. West with utter disgust in every syllable.

"I—think so," answered Annie. "Yes, I loved him."

"Loved him? But now?"

"I love him still, or what I thought he was—what he really is in better moments."

"You will be forgiving him next," cried Mrs. West with bitterest scorn. "Oh, forgive him," she cried again and laughed horridly.

Annie turned and looked at her with large serious eyes.

"I will never marry him," she said presently, "if that is what you mean. But I forgive him freely."

"Why don't you hate him?" asked Mrs. West, and her voice dropped suddenly to a low whisper. "Think of the pain he has caused you; think of him skulking here when you thought him on the Pacific coast; think of him drinking here when you thought he was repenting in exile; think of the disgrace. Think of how the women will talk of you and point at you, engaged to a drunkard. Hate him, I say; hate him."

"Oh, poor Arthur," answered Annie; "hate him when I would die to help him? Oh, if I could die."

All her hidden agony broke out in that despairing wail, but Mrs. West heeded it not, walking to and fro with short and hurrying steps.

"You see," said Annie, recovering herself a little; "he is so sorry, too."

"You have pap in your veins, not blood," said Mrs. West contemptuously. "You are but a poor thing."

"I daresay," said Annie, who still stood with clasped

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hands and tearless eyes, "I wouldn't care what I was if I could help him."

"Marry him then; oh, go and marry him. And take his drunken abuse and his blows and thank him and lick his hands and cry out that you are so sorry for him. He will throw you a word sometimes when he is sober and then you will fall down and kiss his feet and people will call you a dutiful wife."

"I said I would not marry him," said Annie; "and I mean it."

"Then hate him," shrieked Mrs. West.

She stopped in her restless walk and they faced each other. The older woman made little convulsive movements with her hands and her look was as a fiery blaze, charged with the inward flame that consumed her. Annie watched her with sad and melancholy eyes that never dropped or faltered before the other's fury.

"The good God knows how I suffer," said Annie softly, "to see the man I love fall so terribly; but it would be worse if I hated him for it. We are all of us so poor and weak, you know." Her voice grew softer yet. She took Mrs. West's hand again and tried to slip her other arm round her waist. "And you," she said; "I fear you have suffered terribly, been greatly wronged. Try to forget, to forgive—"

"I won't," shrieked Mrs. West and wrenched herself free and with her open hand she struck Annie on the cheek so that a red mark flamed up. "I won't," she cried and ran out of the shanty towards her buggy. "I'm not a weak sentimental baby fool." Suddenly she turned and threw a threat in low tones across her shoulder. "You shall see," she said, "how I forgive such things. Now go and cry over your drunkard."

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"Oh, don't," exclaimed Annie with shrinking pain at the epithet. "Oh, Arthur, Arthur," she moaned and slowly went back to him with shuddering and reluctance. "How could you when I loved you so?" she murmured as she stooped, meaning to lift the unconscious body to a more easy position.

Now that she was nearer she looked at the face in a puzzled way, for it was very white and the breathing was quiet, almost imperceptible, not noisy and laboured. She sprang to her feet and ran to Cross, looked at him intently and then back to Briscoe. "He looks very different," she murmured in a puzzled tone, contrasting him with Cross, flushed and heavy. "He looks ill, can he be ill?" There was a dawning of a hope in her words; she stooped down more closely and now she saw the blood-stain on the broken planks. Then loud rose her cry of joy as she felt eagerly and found the deep raw cut where Deegan's axe had bitten to the bone.

"He's hurt, he's hurt," she cried. "Oh, thank God for that."

CHAPTER XXIII

MEANWHILE Mrs. West drove fast towards the Leigh farm. As yet very little land in this part of the country was taken up, and though the distance was considerable, she passed no human habitation. She did not know the way but she had a general idea of the direction; and though the trail was faint and indistinct she drove on without hesitation. Once or twice she noticed on the ground signs that showed another buggy had recently preceded her, and this she accepted as proof that Deegan had travelled by the same trail. And presently she saw another sign, for at a little distance before her there rose up against the bright blue of the cloudless sky a tiny trail of white smoke; faint and delicate and ominous.

"That is Deegan," she said softly and stopped to watch this little column of white and rising smoke that was indeed barely visible. "It is good," she said presently and drove on though with less speed. Her teeth were clenched and her whole appearance strangely fixed and resolute, even the very reins she seemed to hold with an increased determination; it was as though she were braced for some great resistance.

Soon she came to a clump of trees, a poplar bluff, and in this shelter she drew up. Before her lay the farm. In front were the buildings; large and substantial, evidence of years of strenuous and successful toil. Behind these was an expanse of recent ploughing, and in

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this, in two separate clusters, stood the wheat stacks, ready for the thrashers. Twelve stacks there were in the one group and fourteen in the other, all large and generous, gladdening to the heart of the farmer. A short distance further on stood the half dozen smaller stacks of the oat crop. Near the house, adjoining the stable, were the hay ricks, and in the yard itself ranged beneath a shed was the farming machinery. Except for the hens that were busily searching for grain on the nearest piece of stubble there was no sign of life; and the whole prosperous farm drowsed in the sunshine, calm and peaceful, apparently beyond the reach of harm.

But even as Mrs. West looked she saw smoke rising very faintly indeed, but from several different points. From the furthest group of stacks there was as yet hardly any at all; the oat stacks, too, where the straw was greener and more loath to burn, seemed so far untouched; but from the nearer group the smoke rose dark and threatening and already shot with leaping flames. Mrs. West turned to look at the farm buildings themselves and saw there also rising smoke, and from the window of the house a sudden flame thrust out like a threatening arm and reached up towards the roof.

"That is his house," she said and beat her hands together softly. "All this he made from the bare land and soon it will be ashes and desolate again."

She watched in fascination and now she saw the figure of a man running to and fro in the farm yard, and wherever he passed he left behind him rising smoke and little yellow flames. From the stable he ran to the granary, from the granary to the next building, and then as though impatient ran fast to the house again—and

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still whatever place he left, smoke and little flames stayed there behind.

"It took John twenty years," muttered Mrs. West, "and Deegan will destroy it all in twenty hours. But it is just that he should suffer."

Now the fire had secured firm hold upon one stack and from it rose smoke in a thick column, dark and high. Mrs. West looked abroad over the wide prairie, wondering that all the country side did not flock to that dread signal. But all was empty and solitary with no hint of help. Then far down the trail a tiny dot moved and grew till she saw it a wagon thundering on, and presently could see in it a man standing upright and urging on his horses. She saw how the clumsy vehicle bounced and jumped on the rough track as though in vehement protest against the unaccustomed speed, and she wondered in an abstract uninterested way whether it would upset or not. At the same time she saw the first man run from the farm at speed, as though suddenly alarmed, and fling himself into his waiting buggy. Behind him smoke and little crawling flames were everywhere, but he never looked back; standing like the other man upright on the swaying vehicle and frantically urging his horses to the gallop. Mrs. West sat motionless beneath the poplars, holding her face between her hands, watching with impartial looks the two men that drove so furiously; one to the flames and one away. The whole scene had to her something of the quality of a dream; and behind her steadfast gaze her brain wandered busily amidst small remembered incidents of the long ago.

"He will be too late to save anything," she said aloud. "It is John, my John," she added as the figure became more distinct.

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Rapidly John Leigh drew nearer to his burning home; his wagon came thunderously bounding on the rough track and the horses lay to their work as though they understood the desperate need. He drove straight into the yard and Mrs. West watched with extorted wonder while he did miracles before her eyes. For with such speed he ran about the yard that he outpaced even the swift and hungry flames themselves. With the one effort it seemed that he threw from house and granary the straw that had been piled to start the fires; and almost at the same time he ran in the stables, smothering there also the little growing flames. To and fro he went; quicker to save than the other had been to destroy, and strangled in its birth the demon that once grown had wrought such wide, appalling ruin.

Next she saw him with prodigious effort lift bodily a water barrel into his wagon and then another; and then from the house bring out a pile of blankets. These also he tossed into the wagon and turned the horses' heads towards the burning stacks. Mrs. West looked at them, burning indeed, but not yet thoroughly alight, for Deegan had only set fire to two in each group, trusting that the flames would quickly spread to the rest. It seemed to her possible that he might yet save them also.

She walked from the shelter of the poplars and stood out in the open prairie.

She saw him run back to the house and then back again, burdened with another huge pile of blankets and saw him leap encumbered as he was clear on to the wagon. She saw him with one motion drop the blankets he held and seize whip and reins—and then she saw that he had noticed her for he remained in the same attitude, motionless, with all his swift speed frozen. Thus he stood, bend-

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ing forward in the same position, the horses with cocked and twitching ears waiting for the word that never came; and she stood equally still, sombre and motionless in the bright sunshine.

At last he descended and came slowly towards her, and her glance never wavered as she watched him come till he stood opposite.

"Connie," he said, whispered rather, and repeated the name twice. "Connie, Connie."

She did not answer and presently he spoke again.

"Is that—?" he asked, and turned to glance at the fires behind. "Is that—?"

"Yes," she answered, divining that he questioned whether it was her doing.

He sat down on the grass at her feet and began to play with the lash of the whip he still held. He did not look at her nor she at him. Both watched intently the scene before them. From the stacks now rose singly columns of smoke that above united in one huge pall; giant signal of distress and warning for miles around; so dark and vast it was that even it seemed to blot out the sun itself at noon. From each blazing stack sparks fell abroad, and as the two spectators watched, first one great tongue of fire leaped up and then another. Up the sides of the other stacks, too, little flames were creeping now, climbing from each tier of sheaves to the one above, and at last dancing gleefully on the topmost of all. Always the showering sparks fell around and alighted continually upon the house and buildings that had been so barely saved before. Ever the fires increased in fury so that the smoke grew less dense and the flames vaster and more general; each roaring up towards the sky as though ambitious to lick the very floor of heaven. Even the green

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oat stacks were burning now, smouldering sullenly beneath huge clouds of smoke.

"It burns well," she said at last with a swift glance at the silent man at her feet.

"It should," he answered. "It is the work of twenty years."

"Then why don't you try to save it?" she asked. "You began well."

He nodded twice in grave agreement. She looked at him curiously.

"Well?" she asked again with bitterness in every tone. "Why don't you?"

"Because—" he began and then stopped. "Oh, you know," he said and lapsed into silence.

She raised her hand to her mouth and bit it savagely till the blood came, salt on her lips.

"It will ruin you," she cried, "and I am glad."

He nodded again but made no other answer. He did not look at her nor she at him.

"Even yet," she suggested, "you could save something."

"Oh, yes," he answered and looked carefully. "Nearly half, I should say."

"Then why are you sitting still?" There was a taunt in her voice and yet the subtle suggestion of some uneasy feeling, too. "Are you afraid?" she asked suddenly; and indeed his behaviour puzzled her a little.

"Afraid?" he repeated and the question did not even amuse him. "Tell me you wish it and I will save—yes, I will save quite half."

"I tell you I wish—nothing," she answered.

He picked off a straw that had clung to his arm and began to bite the end. She watched the increasing flames.

"Oh, Connie," he cried suddenly; "do you remember the gate in the lane at home where I kissed you first?"

"No," she answered; "I have forgotten."

"I do not think that is true," he said presently.

"I have forgotten," she repeated.

Together they watched the fires increasing, raging, roaring. Two stacks in each group were almost in ashes now and all were alight, some blazing and some with flames just beginning to grow upon their sides. It seemed that the stacks broke into flames as a tree breaks into blossom in the spring.

"The oat stacks will go next," she said.

"Yes," he agreed, "the oat stacks will go next."

He began to draw lines on the ground with the butt of his whip; and she watched him with a kind of sullen, baffled curiosity, with constant glances towards the fires.

"Look," she said suddenly; "you did not do such wonders after all. The fire in the house is breaking out again."

"It is the sparks from the stacks," he answered; "the granary and other buildings will catch soon."

"Are you not sorry," she cried, "to see your own place in flames?"

"Yes," he answered simply; "but if it pleases you, it is well."

"I suppose you mean you have it assured?"

"As a matter of fact," he answered slowly, "it is assured—well assured."

"I thought so," she sneered.

"Against accident," he added gently.

"I swore to ruin you—to make you pay," she cried as though defending herself.

"You have ruined me, I suppose," he answered; "so

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far as that goes. There is twenty years of work and all that I possess going up in that fire."

"I am glad."

"I am only sorry there is not more," he cried passionately. "My life were little if it pleased you."

"Oh, you talk," she sneered.

Suddenly she turned upon him, her face contorted with malice. She put up one hand and covered her right eye, leaving the blind one free. "Now," she said, her mouth twisted sideways with a grin that bared her teeth and showed like an angry vicious snarl, "now I can see nothing, no fire." With a kind of sneering patience she moved her head slowly from side to side. "There is no fire," she said again. "At least, I cannot see it—nor you—nor anything."

His face went very white; a grey white and ghastly. With a swift movement he raised the hem of her skirt and brushed it with his lips. He dropped it and when she moved her hand and looked again he sat as before, impassive and immobile.

They became silent and presently she sat down on the grass beside him. The flames roared on, the sparks set fire as he had prophesied to the buildings he had so barely saved, and soon there remained nothing on the farm that was not wrapped in flame. Side by side they sat and watched. Once he moved to attend to his own horses and to hers, but he was soon back and sat down again without speaking. Once Mrs. West turned to him and said:

"The neighbours; will none come?"

"You need not fear that," he answered. "Even if they see it, they will think it an ordinary prairie fire and be busy with their own precautions. Some one may come

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to-morrow to investigate perhaps, but then it will be too late."

"That is all right, then," she answered, but in spite of her words a trace of hidden disappointment might have been found in her voice.

The hours passed; the fires began to grow dull for lack of further fuel; the sun moved steadily on towards his setting; and still the two sat there side by side, silent, motionless, sombre. There was only a gentle breeze blowing, so there was little fear of the fire spreading, especially as most of the ground in the vicinity had been freshly ploughed.

"See," said Leigh presently, "the roof of the house has fallen in. I handled every log," he added with a little sigh.

She made no answer and presently he said again:

"The granary has gone now. I lived there while the house was building. Did you know that last year's grain was in it still?"

"That is good news," she answered, but very gloomily.

Again they fell into silence and the unheeded hours passed on. Once again it was necessary for Leigh to move to attend to the horses. The sun went down in glory and the night came swiftly up. The declining fires seemed to gain a new energy in the darkness, wherein they shone with so increased a brightness. But their first energy of destruction was now passed, though still flames and smoke ascended from stacks and ricks and buildings. Where that morning had stood a prosperous farm there now remained but ashes and hot fires and ever rising smoke. The astonished poultry, seeing their world disappear, had found for themselves with much cackling un-

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easy roosts among some young trees. The cattle lay on the pasture placidly chewing the cud, yet clustered near the gate whereby they were usually brought home. Half a dozen pigs, nosing the burning grain, rooted with many squeals near the granaries and alone in the scene of desolation showed sign of life or energy. Near the poplar bluff the two spectators sat side by side as they had sat all day.

"It is finished," said the man suddenly, turning to her. "Dear Connie," he said tenderly and laid his hand on hers.

"How dare you call me that?" she shrieked and sprang away in sudden panic.

"Dear Connie," he said again in slow, lingering tones, as though the words were pleasant on his lips. "Dear, dear Connie."

"I have ruined you," she cried out loudly and her look was wild and staring. She glanced over her shoulder as though she contemplated flight.

"Dear Connie," he said again and looked at her with love shining in his eyes.

"But—but——" she exclaimed quickly, her breath coming in short gasps. "Don't you know I have ruined you?" she exclaimed, as though reminding him of something he might have forgotten. She continued with a strong effort at composure, "Look at the fire and see how I hate you."

"And I love you," he answered. "Oh, Connie, I have waited for long, for very long. Not once have I slept or risen all through these years without remembering again what I did to you. Connie, I saw you lie at my feet, struck by my hand, and so I have seen you ever since, unconscious with a little drop of blood just where my kisses

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had been once." He rose to his feet and held up his clenched hands. "Not the Almighty Himself," he said, "could punish me more than my own thoughts. Hell would be welcome if it burned out that memory."

He began to walk up and down, trying to conquer his emotion, and she watched him, hanging on his words.

"I could never have dared to seek you," he said, "but you have come to me."

"For revenge," she whispered, as if in explanation, but he waved the word aside.

"Revenge you have had in more suffering than any you could inflict. Revenge," he repeated with a kind of wonder. "Why, revenge is childish." He looked away towards the fires. The night had come and they only saw each other by the flicker of the flames that now died down for lack of food and now leaped up again on finding some new sustenance, some new thing to destroy. He looked at the flames as she bade him and then back to her, smiling tolerantly as one smiles at some naughtiness of a spoilt and favourite child. "Why, Connie dear, if it had been to give you pleasure I would have set a match to it any time these twenty years."

They both grew silent again. She was oppressed with a sense of futility and he was confused with conflicting impressions. He came nearer to her and spoke with a sudden air of confidence, of mastery.

"Connie," he said, "now you have brought us nearer again. Before we were so far apart, it seemed so hopeless, there was nothing I could do. I felt that the advance must come, if it ever did, from you; that I could do absolutely nothing——"

"Nothing," she cried, and suddenly she turned upon

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him fiercely and all in one moment it seemed that he was again the unforgiven outcast, and she the indignant, the importunate for justice. Involuntarily he drew back. She cried out: "False and treacherous, there was something you could do and that you did. You consoled yourself, you forgot me, you did not care."

She ran from him, still crying with a low wail: "You did not care, you did not care." She found her buggy and climbed in, ready to start. He stood where she had left him, and dared make no effort to keep her. She struck her horse with her whip and as she passed out into the darkness of the night she saw him still standing, upright and motionless, his head hanging forward on his breast.

She drove fast and recklessly through the night, trusting chiefly to her horse to take her back to town. Once she spoke aloud as though arguing with some one unseen.

"It is different with Annie," she said. "I could forgive other things easily, just as she does. That is nothing, absolutely nothing. But that he could put another in my place, no woman could forgive that. Nor I." She repeated the last two words several times as she drove on through the utter darkness of the lonely land that showed nowhere any faintest sign of light.

CHAPTER XXIV

AT last Mrs. West's tired horse brought her to the little town, long wrapped in slumber, and stood still with drooping head outside the stable. Mrs. West herself felt no weariness and she got down briskly to open the door. She soon found a lantern and by its dim rays as it hung on the nail where she placed it, she unharnessed the horse and led it to its stall.

For a moment or two she stood watching the row of horses which, disturbed by her entry, were moving, and some turning their heads to look at her. The soft champ-ing of her own pony as it ate eagerly of the hay before it came with a peaceful sound to her ears, and the warm smell of the stable was welcome after the chill sharpness of the night air. With peculiar distinctness a vision came to her of the man she had left, brooding and solitary by the side of his ruined farm. She wondered whether he would have stood so if she had tried to comfort him, and suddenly she thrilled to feel within herself the sweet power to charm away his misery.

"After all," she thought, "he is sorry—if I did forgive—but it is not possible. Still if I did—if I——"

And even as these disconnected thoughts invaded her mind and were not banished, a shadow came swiftly in the darkness across the yard and Deegan's voice said in a low tone:

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"Is it you? I have waited so long till I saw the light and guessed you were back."

He came in and stood by the lantern so that its radiance fell full upon his face. Mrs. West did not answer, but a sudden sense of abhorrence seized her, for was not this the man that had fired the farm? His face was flushed and his eyes very bright, and they rested on her with a new expression that she saw but did not understand, yet that she felt increased her abhorrence. She thought he must have been drinking, as indeed he had, though the spirit he had taken had not affected him in the least.

He did not speak, but his eyes still rested on her, except when now and then he would glance rapidly over his shoulder to see that all was still quiet.

She stood passively, for there was about him an air that somehow daunted her, because there was in it some subtle suggestion of companionship, of familiarity. He held out his hand to her and she shrank back quickly.

"Come," he said softly; "come, dear."

He spoke the last word rustily, with obvious effort, yet it appalled her as no threat or abuse could have done. She did not answer. He continued:

"Everything is ready. I have fixed up everything."

"Ready?" she repeated, trying to gain time. "What for?"

"To skip," he said simply. "After to-day's job we've got to get out."

She drew back by imperceptible degrees as he spoke until she was to him but a dim shadow in the semi-darkness of the stable. As she drew back he began to follow, large and threatening to her fancy as his body showed black against the light of the lantern by the stable door.

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"What's on now?" he asked with quick suspicion in his tone. "Don't you know what I've done? We must clear or them flaming police will be after us. Don't you know I done accordin' as you said?"

"As I said?" she cried. "Why, I never told you to do *that*. Do you know he is ruined—absolutely ruined?"

"Ain't that what you was after?"

"No, no," she answered quickly; "at least, not in that way."

"Now see here," exclaimed Deegan angrily, "you play no monkey tricks with me and don't you forget it."

Suddenly he stretched out his arm before she was aware and caught her in a fast grip and led her to the door so that the light fell directly between them, illuminating either face, hers very pale and his red and flushed. She made a little movement to free herself, exclaiming that he hurt her, and instantly he loosened his grasp. Then she looked up and met his glance full; and there was that in his eyes made her cry out and stagger back as though before a heavy blow, so real and fierce was the passion that swift look disclosed to her. She held up her hands as though to shield herself.

"You know that I love you—real and hearty?" he asked.

"No, no," she cried, "not that."

"I do so," he said. "You knew it; you must have known it. I told you."

"But not like that," she urged. "How could I guess? I thought—I did not think really, but I thought it just a fancy. How could I guess? I am old and ugly. Look. I have only one eye. See yourself. It would be absurd; you could not love a one-eyed woman?"

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"I wouldn't give a cent though you was blind and deaf and dumb," he answered, in low, thick tones. "You're mine. I've done it and paid for it, and you promised."

"Oh, no," she exclaimed indignantly, quite relieved at a statement to which she felt competent to give emphatic denial. "You forget, Mr. Deegan, you asked me twice to marry you, I know, but I said it was absurd. I thought you understood that. I am sure I was plain about it—quite sure."

"I asked you twice and you said 'No.' That's all right. But then you said you would do anything for any man what ruined John Leigh. 'Anything,' you said, and I said 'Anything?' and you said 'Yes' to that, quite plain and simple. Of course I knew what that meant and I done it. Now I want you and I mean to have you, accordin' as you promised."

"Oh, but," she protested, "I—I——"

"'Anything,' you said, 'Anything,'" he insisted, "and there ain't no way of backin' out now."

"But I——" she began, then stammered and stopped.

Dimly their interview returned to her mind; she remembered vaguely his words, his eager looks; she seemed to hear again, too, her own reply. She assured herself that she had never dreamed, never once thought of it in the light that Deegan had understood; but she remembered how her passion-tossed soul had raged all that afternoon. She thought of the madness that had possessed her, the reckless, hopeless anger that cared for nothing save its own gratification. She felt that she had neither cared nor thought much about his meaning so long as he went out to do some harm to the man she hated. She

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had been content to let him slip, like a hound on the trail, and for the consequences she had not then cared.

"‘Anything,’ you said," Deegan went on, repeating the word with a monotonous and sombre persistence. "‘Anything.’ So I done it. That’s why."

"But you hated him yourself," she cried, as a loophole of escape presented itself to her. "You said you did?"

"Oh, yes. I had it in for him all right. But that was clean and open. I would have gone out and scrapped with him any day sooner than eat two dinners. Why, but for these blame police him or me would have been shot full of holes before this. You bet we would if this had only been God’s own country across the border. But that ain’t nothing to do with settin’ fire to a man’s place when he’s away. That’s what I done and I done it for you and I want my pay."

"Oh, I will give you money," she cried eagerly, but he dismissed the words with a wave of his hand, with an indifference so profound that it was not even contempt.

"The pay’s you," he said and then repeated, "The pay’s you, Mrs. West, ma’am."

She made a gesture of dissent. She was as yet too bewildered to be either really angry or really frightened. Perhaps, also, she had felt too much that day to respond quickly to any fresh emotion. She tried to argue with him, and when she had made an end he suddenly seized her in his arms and showered hot kisses on her. She fought him dumbly; she struggled; at last she broke away, all trembling and ashamed.

She would have fled but that he had closed the door and now stood with a foot pressed against it. Behind her on the stable walls, his shadow, vast and black,

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moved threateningly to and fro, varying with the swing of the lantern that had been disturbed in their short struggle. This shadow seemed to her like some huge familiar spirit, ready to pounce upon her and carry her away, and she watched it with almost as much fear as she had for the man himself.

"What's wrong with you, anyway?" he asked, his tone now not angry, but suddenly thin and querulous. "I don't want to hurt you. I only want my rights; what you promised your own self."

His tone was now so oddly complaining as of a man defrauded of his just rights, that she almost laughed and she felt less afraid.

"It's quite out of the question," she said, "as I told you. Absolutely."

"You promised," he retorted, "and I'm out to see you don't go back on it."

With a sudden leap he held her again. She screamed sharp and sudden; but he swung her from the ground and held her in his arms like a baby, so that she was overwhelmed with a sudden sense of her own utter helplessness.

"John, oh, John," she cried in blank despair, and the name echoed and re-echoed in the stable and the loft above.

He put her down at that and they stood facing each other. There was an utter silence. The disturbed horses grew quiet again. Outside, the stillness of the lonely night was no more intense than that which reigned in the stable. Neither seemed even to breathe, till at last Deegan asked very gently:

"And John? Who is John?"

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"My husband," she answered proudly, and gave him back look for look, for in some strange way that name had restored her courage. She no longer felt so completely alone.

"He is alive then?"

"Yes," came the swift answer.

"Is it him—John Leigh?" he asked next, his wits quickened by jealousy.

"Yes," she answered again.

"So. I want to think."

He leaned back against the stable door, trying to accommodate his mind to this new fact. She watched him, but her mind, too, was in a whirl of thought. Behind everything was the figure of a lonely man who stood with his head drooping on his breast, watching the dying embers of a great fire. Also she had in her mind the knowledge of how that fire had been caused.

"But you hated him?" he said presently, questioning her.

"Oh, yes," she said, but this time there was no conviction in her level tones.

"I don't understand," he said again, "it clean beats me. But you tell me, I have a right to know. He hated you, too?"

"He? Oh, yes, he must now."

"Well, then," continued Deegan hesitatingly, as though feeling his way through some dark labyrinth, "but still—you come here—and you try to smash him all up—and he never says a word—and you're most mighty thick with him and his girl. I don't see how it hangs together. Did you hate him, real and honest?"

"I suppose so," she answered. "Yes, I did."

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"But then—I don't catch on—why ain't you glad now he is smashed?"

"I hated him because I loved him so," she answered wearily. "Now do you understand?"

"I don't," said Deegan abruptly. "I call that foolin'. But I see one thing mighty plain. He hated you and you him? That's so? Yes. Well, I love you and you don't hate me, and you promised and I mean to see it through. So I'll fix it yet. You trust me." He nodded to her reassuringly and repeated the last phrase, "You just trust me."

"This is getting absurd, Mr. Deegan," said Mrs. West half laughing. "We had better go in. We are both tired and want sleep. In the morning you will understand. You see it is not possible when I am married already."

His persistence seemed to her quite ridiculous. In her brain there floated some hazy joke about turning Mormon. He opened the door and taking the lantern from its nail, held it down so that she could see to step clear of the stable dirt. He glanced up at her as he stooped and saw the half smile that played about her lips. He spoke and his voice came low and matter of fact, yet instinct with dreadful threat.

"Widows can marry again," he said. "Widow West."

That day she had endured all emotions to the quick of her capacity and this reached beyond. She opened her lips to cry out, but her tongue was mute. Even the very darkness seemed to swim about her, and the low swinging light of the lantern to circle round her interminably. She thought that she sank through endless space and her senses left her.

"Swooned, I reckon," said Deegan, as he caught her in

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his arms and his voice was wonderfully gentle, in contrast to the gloomy threat he had just uttered.

He held her very tenderly and she rested lightly in his arms. She lay weak and alone and utterly helpless, and because he loved her truly, chivalry awoke in his heart. It was on him, on him and on no other, that her safety depended, and he thrilled with pride at the knowledge. Now he knew happiness as he walked in the dark loneliness of the night with her head resting on his shoulder and her slight body pressed close to his heart. Indistinctly he could see her white face through the darkness that enveloped them and cut them off, they two together, from all the world beside. He felt with joy that he could kiss her now, and his content was deeper yet to know that he would not, that helpless and unconscious and alone she was yet as safe with him as though they walked at noon in the busy streets of some great city. He would not even pause to prolong the moments that were so sweet to him, but went on steadily till he had placed her just as she was and still unconscious on the bed in her own room.

Then he went away swiftly and sat till the morning came red in the east, thinking and drinking, drinking and thinking.

CHAPTER XXV

FROM her swoon Mrs. West passed into a deep sleep, and it was late the following morning when she awoke. For a little she lay in silence and remembered first of all the great fire and the solitary man watching unmoved the accomplishment of his ruin. Quickly then, as her brain grew active again, came the recollection of that strange scene in the stable, and she sprang up with a shudder as she remembered Deegan's gloomy threat. But she stood in her own familiar room, about her little things eloquent to her of the English village where she had lived so long and where such things did not happen. Outside her window, where the hot sunshine lay all down the street, was the sound of everyday life, the teams going to and fro, the shouting of the drivers, the general murmur of talk and movement mingling with passing footsteps that rang on the wooden sidewalk, and close by was the barking of two angry dogs and a man's voice shouting at them. It seemed to her that what had been said in the stable was but a dream.

"He simply could not have really meant it," she murmured and went to the looking-glass. "It is too absurd," she said with a little sigh and an involuntary movement to arrange her hair afresh. "I am old—old and worn. He must have been drunk or excited, and I perhaps misunderstood or exaggerated. I was tired out, I know."

She went on with her toilet and still assured herself that

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Deegan's feelings could have no real strength. She thought of the little cottage where she had lived a quiet and solitary life so long, and of the several maiden ladies who passed near by peaceful, uneventful days, and with whom she had associated in the tiny events of their village life; the yearly flower show and the Sunday School entertainments. She remembered one lady with whom she had often had tea, a Miss Higgins, precise and prim and formal, and laughed to imagine a man threatening murder for her sake. "And it is more absurd for me than for her," she added to herself, "for she was a fine looking woman, and she was not one-eyed."

So reassuring herself she went on with her toilet and quite forgot that in England there were a thousand little conventions that here did not exist; that there she was but one among a thousand such, but here alone and unique. It did not occur to her that Deegan in all his life had never before met with such a woman as herself except upon the most distant terms, while she had been in his house for months.

Quite easy in her mind about Deegan, her thoughts turned to John Leigh, and she found herself thinking of him with pity and yet, strangely enough, without remorse. She was sorry for him as it affected herself, yet she felt that she had in a sense cleared the score between them. She felt that now she could meet him on equal terms. Before he had been the tyrant, the bully who had insulted her with a blow; now he was a ruined and solitary man and her heart went out to him. She saw him suffering the vengeance she inflicted; her pride became soothed, and her heart opened to the pity and the love that came, old comrades as they are, hand in hand to seek an entrance.

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"I will make him come to me again," she said softly. "I will not let him know I have forgiven him, but he shall guess, perhaps he will ask it and then—"—she laughed softly—"then I will give it him. I will even forgive him that other woman, because he may have been mad, as his father said. But he shall swear first that he never, never cared for her."

It was with almost a happy face that Mrs. West went lightly down the stairs and found her way into the kitchen. Pierre was busy there with the dinner and she at once took control again, finding with little grimaces of disgust dirt and untidiness everywhere. Yet she showed a good temper over each fresh discovery that rather puzzled Pierre, who was vaguely aware that things were not quite as they might be. Even when she discovered the best copper kettle filled with grease for soap boiling, she only told him he would have the job of cleaning it again, and when he showed her a cake he had been trying to bake and asked why it was a failure, she only burst out laughing when it appeared he had quite forgotten the baking powder. She did indeed display hot indignation when presently she found a man's sock in the soup he was boiling for dinner. She held it out angrily at the end of a long spoon she had raked it up with, and Pierre admitted with profuse apologies that the day before he had done a little private washing and had stretched a line above the cooking stove for drying purposes.

"It must have fallen, madam," he protested between his bows as he retreated before her wrath.

Yet Mrs. West did not long remain angry. Suddenly the ludicrous aspect of the thing occurred to her as he retreated and she followed, waving the sock indignantly.

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on the end of her spoon. She laughed outright and Pierre even ventured on a remonstrance, so encouraged was he, when she bade him give the soup to the pigs. But she was peremptory and he sighed as he poured it into the trough.

"The good soup, so strong, so hot," he murmured sadly as he poured, "and all for one little sock, just washed and clean. Alas!"

The smile still lingered on Mrs. West's lips as she turned from watching him to see Deegan standing silently in the doorway.

"Good morning," she said brightly, and he looked at her with amazement that she should be so brisk and merry.

"How beautiful you are," he said abruptly, and at that she laughed outright. Yet was there a touch of heightened colour on her cheeks as she imagined that possibly—just possibly—John Leigh might have some similar thought.

"You must not say that, you know," she said. "People will think you are making fun of me."

"Come into my office," he said abruptly.

"Oh," she protested, "I can't. I am far too busy with the dinner. What do you think, Mr. Deegan?" and she told him the story of Pierre and the sock she had found in the soup.

She expected him to laugh, but he listened with unabated gravity, and when she had finished he passed his hand across his brow and looked at her so miserably, with so bewildered an air, that for the first time that morning she felt chilled and a little afraid.

"You are not well?" she asked gently. "Have you not slept? Are you feeling ill?"

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"Slept?" he answered with a start. "Oh, yes, splendidly. At least I think I slept. I think I dreamed. Come into the office."

He turned and after a moment's hesitation she followed him. He gave her a seat and went to his desk, where he sat down himself. He opened a drawer and began to fidget with something that lay hidden in it. She sat waiting, with uneasy glances, first at him and then out of the window at the empty yard of the hotel.

"I heard of Art. Briscoe this morning," he said presently. "That Leigh girl is nursing him. Did you know I split his head open with an axe?"

"Oh," she cried. "Oh," she gasped, incapable of speech. "Oh, oh," she cried again.

"Yes," he said. "I done that. And I burned John Leigh's place yesterday. And what's more, I'm glad I did. Now what are you goin' to do about it?"

"But Mr. Briscoe?" she exclaimed. "Is he—is he dead?"

"They say he'll die sure thing. But Doc Evans says maybe he won't if the Leigh girl goes on nursin' him the way she is and don't let up. But it's you I want to know about."

"But what did you do it for?" she asked, half unconsciously evading the point he was pressing on her.

"Oh, I guess it happened. Course he was kind of mad with me and he went for me like a whole sackful of wild cats and I just had to, to get away. But about this other thing?"

She did not answer him, for she did not know what to say.

"Mrs. West, ma'am," he went on presently, "I love you

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straight and honest. I don't know why and I'm kind of sorry about it, too, but I love you as hot as I was twenty years younger and as strong as I was twenty years older. I can't help it. I've strove against it. I've wrestled with it. I've got drunk and loved you more. I've sworn off for a week and loved you all the time. I've gone to talk to other women and it was only you I saw. I love you, rough and ignorant as I know I am, and not amountin' to much, but I love you—I—I just dote on you."

His first words had seemed to Mrs. West touching and eloquent; they had moved her profoundly and she contemplated appealing to his better side, trusting him, thanking him for the honour he did her, and, showing him that it was impossible, ask him to forgive and to forget her. She had much power over him, and since love calls to righteousness as deep to deep, such an appeal might have saved much. But that last unlucky phrase touched her sense of the ridiculous and drowned the wiser impulse in sheer grotesqueness. She bit her lip to keep back a laugh and again his passion seemed to her unreal.

"Well," she said lightly, "you must try to stop doting, I am afraid. Get over it, Mr. Deegan; you will forget it in a week if you try."

"Get over it?" he said, and he saw the half repressed smile.

His hand that was hidden in the drawer closed there with a firm purpose, and with his other hand he waved her back as she walked towards the door. She hesitated for a moment, but still moved on, putting her hand on the latch.

"Please come back," he said, and his face, as he lifted it

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to her while he spoke, was so white and drawn that her heart reproached her and she sat down again.

"You don't believe I love you," he said. "Well, look at me."

Their eyes met and in the depths of his there burned so fierce a passion that she became troubled, half convinced against her will.

"Not love," she protested weakly.

"Yes, love," he said. "I never thought folk did honestly, or ever before saw a woman I would have given a hill of beans for. But now I know. I can't tell you how I feel, for I never had education. But I'm all on fire, on fire, body and brain on fire. I'm all in a shake and inside me there's two things fightin' and only God knows which'll win. I don't."

She looked at him, puzzled and distressed.

"But why?" she burst out, almost with irritation. "Why, it's so silly."

"As if I knew why," he retorted, with an equal show of temper. "It's unreasonable to ask. Don't you believe me yet? Haven't I given you proof? Don't it amount to anything that I tried to ruin that young fool of a Briscoe because I thought you wanted it? Nothing that if he dies I'll have done murder? Nothing that I've burned a man's place, buildings and stacks and ricks together? Nothing that the police may be here any time? Nothing that I'm like again what I was on the road years back? God in Heaven, woman, what more do you need? My life? Maybe you shall have that before long. But there's my soul and my heart, and you've torn 'em into little bits and still you don't believe I love you. Did

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your John—John, curse him for a black-hearted rat—did he ever give you such proofs?"

In his excitement Deegan had risen to his feet and now he stood over her, waving his arms in the air. He paused, challenging her for an answer, with his hands hovering over her head like some great bird ready to pounce upon her at a moment. She answered him bravely.

"Yes, he has suffered for my sake for twenty years."

"And I whole lifetimes," he screamed at her. "Years, centuries."

Then his voice dropped suddenly as though he realized the noise he was making. He went back to his seat and Mrs. West saw with surprise and relief that his face had suddenly become quiet and calm; there was not even a drop of perspiration on his forehead nor any sign to witness to the extreme agitation he had just displayed. He leaned his head on his hands and she waited.

"You ain't treated me particular white," he said presently.

"I am afraid—I fear——" she began hesitatingly, but he so evidently paid her no attention that she did not attempt to finish the sentences.

"Cæsar!" he continued after a long pause, "I would never have believed one woman could have played such mischief with us all. It's worser than a bad bull loose in town. Do you see any way out?"

"How do you mean?" she asked. "Do you—mean——"

He looked up straight at her. Her attention became enchained. She shivered at she knew not what and suddenly she became afraid. Slowly he nodded to her and then she saw that he held a revolver across his knees.

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"The fact is," he said slowly, "this earth ain't big enough for me and you and him. One of us has got to—to go." He repeated the word and then changed it, still in the same slow, dreamy tones. "To go—to go—to die." Then he paused and added presently in a quick, impatient manner: "Right away, too. And, Mrs. West, ma'am, you must say which."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE silence in the little room grew intense. Deegan sat motionless, his head hung down, and it might have been supposed that he slept.

Mrs. West sat as quietly, though sometimes she looked from the window and sometimes her glance would rest upon the little, shining pistol as it lay on Deegan's knees, so remain for a moment and then flash away. Twice some one came to the door, but each time the knocking went unanswered. At last Mrs. West spoke abruptly, her voice strangely distinct in the silent room.

"Of course," she said, "of course, you don't mean this."

"Oh, yes," he said wearily, without looking up, "I mean it all right. Me or you or him—and your call."

Somehow no oath he could have sworn, no declaration he could have made, no elaborate form of words, could have so deeply impressed her with a sense of inflexible purpose. She made no answer; now her brain was curiously empty; now filled with so many thoughts that her head ached with the stress of them.

She had longed for revenge, planned for revenge, lived for it alone, desired it as only the passion-possessed desire, done such things that she might attain it. Now the opportunity was presented to her, and she shrank from it with unutterable fear and loathing. She remembered her plans with horror as at something too dreadful for thought and she could not believe that such things had really been

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her desire. She even became afraid that unaware her tongue, turning traitor, might pronounce her husband's name, impelled by the very extremity of her contrary intention, and in that fear she clapped her hand across her lips. The last remnant of her hate disappeared in that dread possibility.

She began to try to think of some means of escape from the dreadful predicament in which she found herself. She thought in turn of each possibility. She would not speak her husband's name; to speak Deegan's would be a kind of murder, and she was ashamed as she remembered how it was she herself who had put an edge to his intention. There remained the third course. She began to shake as she sat on her chair, to shake and shiver as though very cold, and then suddenly anger came to her relief.

"Coward, villain," she cried, casting about in her mind for worse terms of reproach. "You cannot force me to such a choice. What right? I will go to the police. I will call for help. How dare you hint such things? You wicked villain, you shall be punished. Oh, I did not think you were so bad."

"I wasn't," he said gloomily. "I am now. As for makin' you choose, that's dead easy. If you get the police or try to stop me, I'll take it you mean me. If you say nothin' at all, I'll take it you mean him."

"It is barbarous," she cried. "It is too awful." She put her hands to her head and glanced round her with bewilderment. "Have you no pity?" she cried.

"Take your time," he answered. "I don't want to hustle you. But you must say before sundown."

She looked at him, contemplating different appeals to

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soften him. But he sat crouched and impassive, and she knew beforehand that each one would break helplessly against an inflexible determination. He made no protestations nor showed any sign of agitation as he waited the awful decision forced upon her, and yet she knew well there were no pleadings, nor words, nor tears that would avail to turn him. He would have faced it out against all obstacles, and she caught at her head and groaned and wondered how it had all happened. Yet though she knew it hopeless, she cast continually furtive glances at him, searching for some sign of weakness or hesitation, some hint of relenting or suggestion that her distress was softening him.

Now the sun in its course was beginning to shine in by the little window and it seemed to Mrs. West that life was good. She felt that even to exist is compensation for all evil. Presently she moved so as to sit in the now flooding sunshine that yet could not warm the chill horror at her heart.

"Mr. Deegan," she said softly.

He looked up and at the sight of his face, pale and impassive, with burning eyes sunk deep in their sockets, she shuddered and abandoned the appeal she had contemplated.

"Would you have me do murder?" she cried passionately.

"No, no," he answered with unconscious irony, "only show the way—like you did before."

And at that answer she fell silent. She began to wonder whether there would be much pain, and it occurred to her that poison was not disfiguring.

Her mind went back to the things she had planned that

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morning, of how she had determined to forgive at last, of the happy future she had imaged in her mind. It seemed to her very hard and unfair that this should happen now. She thought of John Leigh and longed intensely to see him again, but of Arthur Briscoe and Annie she never thought at all. She looked again at Deegan and now with sullen rage. It was he who had put this upon her and it would be only fair to speak his name and catch him in his own trap. She hesitated a little. His name trembled on her lips; she spoke it, but in an inaudible whisper.

"Which one?" said Deegan softly, and when she made him no answer, "Take your time, take your time. But I know."

In his own mind Deegan was quite certain she would choose him, nor did he desire otherwise. Quietly as he sat, he had already bidden farewell to life and now was thinking with a strange happiness of how he had held her so lately in his arms, helpless and senseless, and refrained from even kissing her. "She'll never know that," he said to himself, and there was peace in his soul.

"I cannot," groaned Mrs. West, and to that he made no answer.

He sat so quietly that her anger against him grew less; he assumed to her eyes the aspect of some impersonal messenger of fate, against whom one might no more reasonably rage than against an illness or an accident. It seemed extraordinary to her that she, a quiet, middle-aged lady, should be in so strange and fearful a position. Sometimes the whole thing seemed to her unreal, so that she had again an impression that it was all a dream. But Deegan, sombre and unmoving, with the pistol resting on

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his knee, he and it were real enough. If only John Leigh would come to her help! Suddenly she began to rage against him, almost as though he knew and would not come. After all, it was through his great fault that all this had happened. She had desired revenge. Why not take it, now that it lay ready to her hand. Her lips framed his name. She moved impatiently and Deegan fancied that she spoke.

"Which one?" he asked again.

"How do I know you will agree to what I say?" she asked in her turn.

"That needn't bother you, not a little bit," he answered. "Just whatever you say; that goes. I ain't going back on my word."

And she knew that this was certain.

"Is there no other way?" she cried with despair in her tones.

"Oh, yes," he said, "there's one other way—and you know it."

She looked up eagerly with almost a dawning hope, but now she saw an evil look on his face where before had been only inflexible resolution. She understood and sighed sadly.

"Then I choose," she said and stopped, choking, and he looked to the loading of his pistol. She began to cry softly.

"Don't let it bother you," he said mildly. "I guess it just had to happen."

"Do you still really mean it?" she asked, with lingering hope that is so long a-dying.

He nodded and she shivered again, though she stood with the warm sunshine full upon her. She was shaken

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with swift shudders that ran from head to foot and there was a dry gulping in her throat. He said in a whisper that seemed to her like a boisterous shout:

"Which one?"

"Must it be?" she said hopelessly, and then: "But there is a thing you must promise me first."

"Anything," he answered, "that don't affect the main point."

"Then first you must let me go and say 'good-bye.'"

He did not answer that, but for the first time he showed signs of agitation; his hands shook and he had difficulty in speaking.

"But which one?" he said at last.

"It must be——"

"Yes, yes," he breathed in eager gasps.

"Oh, God, myself," she cried, and flung up her arms and then buried her face in her hands, shuddering terribly.

Next moment she recovered her self-possession and stood up quite calmly; and he faced her, shaken now as she had been the moment before.

"No, no," he whispered, and caught at her dress and held it. "No, no," he protested quickly, "I never meant that."

"If any one at all, it must be me," she answered. She spoke with the faintest glimmer of hope, with just a touch of new appeal in her voice.

Slowly he loosened his grasp on her dress, and strange thoughts came to him and evil. He considered the three courses he had forced her to choose from. He saw himself dead and her with John Leigh, and that was hard to bear. He saw Leigh dead and himself scorned and hated

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by her, and that was harder still to think of. And then he saw her dead, beyond the reach of any rival, and he remembered that he could die beside her. He remembered how that temptation had come to him the night before. If he could not live for her, at least he could die with her and that would be much. The dreadful fascination of the thing began to numb his mind. With his love there began to mingle another feeling. For here is a great mystery; that ever the highest has in it something of the lowest, as Heaven itself held Satan; and so love, immortal and divine, is yet faintly akin to hate, and passion but another name for rage. In Deegan's heart were love and passion, and they strove together, strove in that deadly and awful strife wherein so many tragedies are born, immortalized in great poems or vulgarized in modern newspapers. Deegan groaned and cried out in his anguish, and Mrs. West was more afraid than she had even been before.

"It is just," he said fiercely, "so neither of us shall have you."

"It is just," she answered; "so shall I make amends."

He sprang up and seized her arm. She looked him full in the face and he went back to the chair with a groan and sat down. She watched his distress with an impersonal pity, as for something that had happened very long ago.

"You promise that?" she said, and now her voice was firm and it seemed that she had forgotten to be afraid.

"I make no promise," he said sulkily.

"Yes," she answered; "that I may go first to bid him farewell."

"No," he cried, and swore aloud. "And tell him you

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love him and hang on his neck with kisses—" he writhed on his chair and bit his hands till the blood came—"and kiss him," he repeated with an evil look at her.

"No," she answered softly; "that I did not mean. Only to see him once more and tell him I'm sorry and say 'good-bye.'"

"Swear you will not tell him you love him," he cried.

"If you wish," she answered, for she felt that now her husband could have no wish to hear that from her, who had ruined him. "I only mean to tell him I'm sorry and say 'good-bye.'"

"And then?" he asked.

"And then I shall come back to you. You can wait in the poplar bluff near the second ravine on Morris's place—there I will meet you and no one need ever know. If you are still determined?"

She realized that she was making arrangements for her own death and she wondered greatly that she was so calm and her mind so free from any great emotion. After all, it seemed but a little thing, a thing both small and easy. Perhaps it might in a way make amends.

"Beneath the poplars," he repeated dully.

"I shall not get out of the buggy," she said suddenly; "I should not dare. You must do it while I sit there."

"It will be better so," he agreed, gnawing his hands. "It is just," he said, and again: "I call it the square thing, just and right. The earth ain't big enough for the three of us. It's the correct thing." He paused and then added in sudden complaint: "It would have been all right if you had told me all about it from the first."

"Oh," she said with a gesture of contempt. "If and

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'if.' But it is very strange. This will be my last day and I am not sorry, for life is very hard and I have made a sad bungle of it."

"It is the only way out," he said, and then they went together to prepare her buggy.

CHAPTER XXVII

MRS. WEST drove away over the level prairies and as she went the now declining sun made long shadows by her side. From the hotel Deegan watched her gloomily, and watched till long after she had disappeared from sight. At last he walked after her down the trail, muttering to himself. Under his arm he carried a double barrelled shot-gun.

Mrs. West went on steadily, her mind almost a blank, for she was too exhausted by recent emotion to respond further. Dimly she was aware that some one was to die, and it seemed incredible that this should be herself. She knew, too, that she was going to bid some one farewell, and in her mind were vague memories of past anger; of schemes, of plans, of bitterest sorrow—and of huge leaping flames that coloured all her thoughts. In these fleeting memories there was only one with real coherence—a girl standing by a gate in an English country lane with beside her a tall figure that stooped to whisper softly, murmuring sweet things and dear.

Presently there rose before her the little group of poplars from beneath which she had watched the fire the day before. Here she alighted, hitched her horse to a tree, and went on softly and on foot. At the other side of the bluff she paused and looked, almost with amazement, at the black ruins of the farm, from which, here and there, small trails of smoke still arose.

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"I did not know it was so bad," she said with trembling lips, and moved on by the side of the bluff till she heard a slight sound close by. Then she went more carefully and soon, peeping between the trees, she saw her husband a little way in front. She remained hidden, watching him with a strange sense of being once more at home, with a sweet sense of peace and rest stealing over her.

Leigh sat on the ground near his wagon, which was still where it had been the day before, though apparently the horses had been removed. He himself was busy slicing a piece of bacon. He had built a fire in a hole in the ground near by and over it, in a very old and rusty frying pan, he was trying to cook a kind of pancake. The tail board of the wagon was lying by his side and was evidently to serve as a table. On it stood a tin plate and an open knife, and an old fruit can which was now serving as kettle and teapot in one. Mrs. West saw all this from her place of concealment, and felt keenly the roughness and discomfort of his camp.

She came out into the open and he sprang up with a little cry of surprise.

"What is that?" she asked severely with an odd appearance of rebuke, pointing her finger at the fire.

"That," he said, surprised at her question and a little disappointed. "Oh, that is only my supper. I had no dinner," he added with an air of apologizing for the necessity of a meal.

"Then you must be hungry," said Mrs. West, and picked up the frying pan. She inspected the contents with grave disgust and deliberately tilted it into the fire. Then she surveyed the pan itself with equal disapproval.

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"It is old," she said, "and dirty. Why do you use such things?"

"Well," he answered, rather embarrassed at the question; "the fact is—a little accident."

"Oh," she said and she looked slowly up to the black scene of ruin and desolation that lay before her, with, in places, rising smoke to tell that fire still smouldered beneath. "There has been a fire," she announced as though the fact surprised her.

He looked at her puzzled.

"It seems so," he said.

"An accident?" she asked.

"No," he answered. "A result—a natural consequence." He stared at her and then asked gently: "You know, Connie?"

She shivered a little as she heard, and without answering she began to busy herself preparing his supper. He watched her with a blank amazement while she moved quickly about his camp, finding the things that she needed. A few necessities he had borrowed from his nearest neighbour and one or two things he had rescued from the ashes of his house; and with these rough materials she worked busily till at last she turned to him with a bright smile.

"Now, John," she said, "it is ready for you."

He came obediently and sat down, wondering to see how appetizing a meal she had prepared. Astonished beyond measure, and in some alarm, too, for her manner seemed to him very strange, he yet tried to eat and he made one or two attempts to speak easily about trifling matters. All the time his eyes rested on her lovingly, and

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he had seen with exultation how she prepared this meal for him.

"Are you not hungry?" she asked presently with an air of disappointment.

"Not for food," he answered slowly.

He put out his hand and touched her dress, and she did not move away. He stood up and took her hand in his, and this, also, she permitted. He put both arms round her, still unresisting, and slowly drew her nearer till she was pressed close to him. Then she put down her head on his shoulder and wept bitterly; and he, straining her to his heart, spoke loving words in her ear.

"But do you still love me?" she asked; "after all that I have done."

"Yes," he answered; and she put up her face like a child to be kissed. "But the fire," she said; "and the other things. Oh, you do not know. I have been so bad these last months."

She fell to weeping still more bitterly and he consoled her, saying that now they would begin a new life and let all the old be forgotten. His happiness thrilled in him so that he spoke confidently between his caresses and she listened with tears.

"But now you must have your supper," she interrupted him. "You are hungry?" she added with a touch of anxiety.

"Awfully," he declared, and began to eat again while she sat by and smiled and waited on him, seeing his every want supplied with a flutter of eager attention; and the moments were to them the happiest that either had known for many years.

At last he declared that he was satisfied. She cleared

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away the remnants of the meal, rejecting his assistance and forcing him to sit down again. So he waited quietly till she had done, following her with loving eyes and hardly realizing this sudden change in her conduct nor daring to think of the hopes that filled his heart. Presently she came back to him and said:

"Do you smoke still?"

"Smoke? Oh, sometimes, but not now, thanks."

"But you always liked to after supper," she said, checking with her hand a movement he made to rise. She sat down beside him and with a half-laughing, half-timid look, she began to feel in his pockets, while he watched her with an amazed affection, half afraid it was all but such a dream as had sometimes come to him. "See how well I do it," she said aloud, in her thoughts likening herself to the girl-bride of long ago, and wiping out for the moment all the sad years that lay between. She opened his pouch and was filling the pipe when on a sudden impulse he caught her tightly to him, murmuring broken words of love. In his mind all was pure happiness, joy and gratitude that at last they were reconciled and his dearest hopes fulfilled. But in hers was a sombre picture of a lonely poplar bluff with a man waiting—waiting for her. Therefore she resolved to hold the passing moments more closely and she returned his caresses, determined to extract from each second all the happiness possible.

"But you must smoke you know and be comfortable," she said at last when he had held her many moments and gently she freed herself.

She handed him his pipe and to please her he drew at it though the smoke choked him.

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"Now, will you kiss me," she said, and then: "Kiss me again," and a third time: "Just once more," she said: "for you will never again."

"Every day of our lives," he answered, and laughed from sheer happiness.

At that she shivered and clung closer to him, for she knew this must be her last day on earth. He wondered at her emotion, and he became uneasy, watching her closely.

"Listen," she said: "I want to talk about the past."

"Is that necessary?" he asked with instinctive shrinking. "It is dead. Let us forget it altogether."

"Ah, if we only could," she cried with infinite pain in her voice. "But, if it is dead, the present is its child."

She began to speak rapidly, telling him how she had come there to seek a reconciliation, and of how she had heard of his second marriage, and so found her hate renewed and increased. Then she told him of her schemes and plans, and of how at last she had bribed Deegan to fire the farm. Only of what Deegan had thought that bribe to consist of, she did not speak; nor of the scene in the stable; nor yet of the choice that he had thrust upon her that afternoon. Yet she said enough to increase the uneasiness he already experienced. When she had finished she paused for a moment and then continued:

"Can you forgive me, John? Now you know how I have hated you, and all that I have done. Can you love me still?"

For answer he kissed her passionately, and cried out, that he, at least, had no right to speak of forgiving any one.

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"But you see," she said, "why, if the past be dead, its consequences still live."

He sighed and moved uneasily.

"One thing leads to another," he said after a pause. "But I must tell you, too, that at least the future may have no surprises."

He hesitated, gulped a little, and then said with desperation, for he feared greatly how she might take the opening of the old wounds. "You see, Connie, there is that child Annie?" As he spoke he looked at her fearfully, half expecting her to turn and leave him. She did not speak and he went on, the words coming jerkily: "When *it* all happened, when I came out of gaol, when you did not answer my letter—"

"I burned it," she interrupted; "I was so angry then, sad and angry—but most angry."

"It was only natural," he said, "and I knew it and dared not come near you. I think I went mad. I tried to kill myself three or four times. Once a fool of a boatman pulled me out of the river, thinking it was an accident. So I gave him a sovereign and said I was much obliged. Then I said I would drink myself to death—and I drank till I lost all sense." He paused and swallowed in his throat and went on. "Annie's mother was a barmaid at the place I chiefly went to—oh, Connie, do not move away! listen at least till I have done."

"Yes, oh, yes, I will listen," she said quickly. "I did not mean to move. I know better now and what I am."

"She was not a good woman, I know; but she was kind and I think she had some idea of saving me. All this time I went on drinking steadily. I was in a hospital

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twice. I know this is disgusting, Constance. I hardly knew what I was doing."

"Go on," she said.

"I heard you had dropped my name and called yourself by your maiden name—Mrs. West. That seemed very dreadful, very final, and I swore I did not care and would show that. There was a ceremony of marriage I think, a civil ceremony, but I am not sure where. I think she knew you were alive but I cannot tell. I only remember that all the time I had a vague idea I was proving my indifference. The next thing I remember clearly is waking up in a hospital and a Doctor—a man with eye-glasses and a long thin nose—leaning over me and saying 'Pig' in a meditative kind of way. One of his front teeth had gone, I remember. Well, I was discharged from hospital and she met me. Constance, this is hard to tell."

"It is hard to listen to," she answered.

"I daresay," he said groaning. "I daresay. I went on like that till Annie was born. That was a shock somehow. Then her mother died. She was troubled on her death bed about—things—her connection with me. It was dreadful and I knew it was my fault and so—"

"Did you love her?" said Mrs. West harshly.

"I never pretended—she knew—you see there was no question of that, exactly."

"Go on," said Mrs. West, and this time her tone was milder.

"To ease her as she was dying I promised to keep the truth from Annie and to be a good father to her. I have tried—but I never dreamed then that I should see you again. I must tell her now and it will—for Annie is

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very proud. You see, Constance, you are not the only woman I have injured; three have cause to hate me. And I never meant it."

"Are you not very ashamed?" asked Mrs. West, but not with severity, more as if asking for information.

"Oh, yes," he answered, "it has been very bitter, and bitter hard not to drink again and forget, if only for a night. I have rolled on my bed and groaned with the shame of it, groaned aloud till Annie has knocked at the door to ask if I were ill."

"Which of us is worse?" she asked. "You or I?"

"Why," he answered quickly, "what you did is my fault. You have not such things to keep you awake at night."

She bowed her head and stood in infinite dejection, remembering what her passion of hate had betrayed her to and the penalty that she must pay. "And there is no help," she said to herself; "for if it were not me, it would be him."

"But now," he urged anxiously, for something in her manner alarmed him greatly; "now we can forget and live happily together again."

"Happiness is not for such as us," she answered sadly. "We must pay now; at least, I must. John, dear John, have you forgiven me everything, forgiven me altogether? Are you sure you love me still?"

For answer he caught her to him, crying: "Yes; oh, yes." She put her arms around his neck and kissed him passionately on the lips, and it was as though neither time nor sin had ever parted them. They stood thus for long, and then she spoke slowly.

"Kiss me again," she said; "for the last time."

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"What do you mean?" he asked sternly, suddenly alarmed.

"I must go," she answered; and he laughed, but uneasily.

"I must," she repeated, intending to go without any further words. But there was such comfort in his arms, such security in his embrace, that her resolution broke.

"Oh, don't let me," she wailed. "Don't let me go."

"You shall not," he said, still holding her.

"Oh, but I must," she answered, for now she remembered Deegan's threat. "If you don't come back, mind, I'll go to him—and mighty glad, too." She seemed again to hear those words and suddenly she broke out. "Oh, John, hate me, hate me; then I shall not mind. Say you hate me, John, dear John."

"What do you mean?" he repeated. "Tell me at once."

"I daren't," she answered, shaking her head.

"You must," he said, watching her keenly. She still shook her head and then he asked slowly: "Why did Deegan set fire to the farm for you?"

"Oh," she moaned, and would have fallen had he not held her so tightly. "I cannot bear it; it has all been so foolish, too. Oh, I cannot bear it. For we might have been so happy. Now I must go. Don't think too hardly of me, John. I have been very wicked but I am paying for it, and understanding all I have lost."

She moved away from him towards the buggy, and now it seemed that all agitation had gone, leaving her calm and fearless. He followed her thinking deeply. He did not attempt to stop her, and when they reached the buggy she turned to him and said:

"Just kiss me once more, John, and tell me you love

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me, and then it will not be so hard. And, John, never tell Annie anything."

She stood now with one foot on the step of the buggy and she leaned back towards him that he might bid her farewell. He put one arm round her waist and looked down at her, frowning intently.

"If you won't tell me," he said; "Deegan shall."

With a swift, strong movement, he swung her to the ground and sprang to the buggy in her place, snatching up whip and reins.

"John, dear John," she screamed; "don't, oh, please don't. He will shoot you. Oh, come back, come back, he will kill you."

"I thought as much," said Leigh grimly. "Wait here. I'll drive straight back—or send."

He lashed the horse with his whip and set off at a furious gallop. She stood watching him; frozen, overwhelmed, despairing.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AT last Mrs. West moved slowly, looking round her with a bewildered air, and sighing deeply. Then quite suddenly she set off running at her topmost speed, as though she hoped to overtake her husband. The trail was close at hand, but it was only by good fortune that she found it, and only a miracle saved her from straying off it on to the open prairie. But the sod felt differently to her feet when once or twice she left the worn track, and though she was not conscious of attention she recognized the change each time and returned at once to the trail. Now, too, the Northern Lights began to shine and flicker in the sky above, giving out a dim unearthly radiance by which she could distinguish her path.

Still she pressed on, unaware of fatigue, going quickly through the darkness and more quickly by the twilight of the Aurora, knowing that her husband had gone before her, going to his death that she might live. She continually pictured his murder in her mind and at intervals she murmured: "For my sake, for my sake." Overhead the Aurora, at first faint and indistinct was now in shape like a huge crown, a diadem of heaven suspended over earth, with waves of light and changing colour spreading continually through it, and sometimes long streamers of fire that shot out to the furthestmost edge of the horizon. Beneath Mrs. West went rapidly on her way across the

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desolate prairies, and thought of the sublime spectacle in the skies above, merely as affording her a scanty light and grumbled that it was so uncertain. In spite of all difficulties she hurried on with wonderful speed. At last she came to where her husband lay bleeding with near-by Deegan, still holding his empty gun in his hands.

He heard her footsteps before he could see her, and at once he rose and stood waiting with an expectant air. In the dim and varying twilight of the Aurora she saw him, and saw how the ghostly radiance illumined his pale face, distorted by emotion.

"Where is he?" she asked swiftly. "Where is he?"

Deegan answered with an involuntary gesture, and she sank to the earth by the prostrate form he indicated; sorrow and remorse gripping her yet more tightly. Before, there had always been a chance, a vague hope, a possibility; but now all cloudy imaginings were dispersed by the hard reality. For John Leigh lay unconscious, huddled in a formless heap, bleeding from a dozen wounds where the scattering shots had struck him, so that her hands as she ministered to him were wet—red and wet. She spoke no word but her mind was busy, recalling all the things that had led up to this—this figure half hidden by the uncertain light which she longed to embrace with soft caresses and yet dreaded to see more clearly.

"I done it," said Deegan from the outer darkness. "I done it." He came a little nearer, so that she saw him, vague and indistinct, but visible against the illumined sky. "I said I would and I done it." Again he paused and she listened without answering. Her grief was silent and he, hearing no sound of lamentation or reproach, mis-

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understood her, entertaining hopes both false and wicked.

"I done it," he repeated after an interval and his voice grew softer and more anxious. "I done it soon as I saw who it was. Mrs. West, ma'am, did you send him?" Still she did not answer, and he, encouraged, came a little nearer and whispered again: "Did you send him? Did you now?"

Then she understood the question and what it implied, and she screamed out, loud and sudden, so that he sprang back nervously and then swore at himself.

"Oh, he's not dead," she wailed; but with terror and despair she found that his heart was silent, that he did not breathe, that he was unaware of all she did. She pressed kisses on his brow and stroked his cheeks and remembered all the kind things he had done in by-gone days, and she lifted his heavy hands and pressed them to her lips, remembering how he had once kissed hers and laughed tenderly over their feebleness and tiny size. So she remembered now the good he had done to her and forgot utterly the evil, as before she had remembered the evil and forgotten the good. She felt how deeply she loved him and she held him closely so that almost she found a touch of happiness to lighten her despair, as above the Aurora illumined the darkness of the night. Near by, in a restless circle, round and round them, paced Deegan with uneven steps, holding now in his hands a gun no longer empty. At last he spoke.

"Mrs. West, ma'am," he said. "You come away from there. You hear me?"

"You can kill me too, if you like," she said and she bent over the silent form with caresses. "It's no more than I deserve."

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"You did send him," urged Deegan. "You did send him. Say you sent him. I was glad all through when I saw it was him. I didn't care a cent if it was murder so long as you sent him. I could have skipped with joy. 'Come out, you skulking villain,' he yelled and I saw he meant business and I let loose with both barrels. He went staggering like the whisky was in him and he called 'Connie' twice. Then he dropped and I didn't give a cent 'cause I reckoned you sent him. 'Connie, dear,' he said—"

"Oh, did he?" cried Mrs. West, suddenly joyful. "Oh, say that again; please say that again."

"That struck me all cold. So I sat and waited. But if you sent him, it won't fizz on me a little bit; no, not though I see his face all bleeding for ever after. Not a continental—not that." And in the silence she heard distinctly as he twice snapped finger and thumb together.

"He came to save me; he knew and he came instead of me and I love him for it," she answered slowly.

"Say you lie," he yelled at her. He resumed his restless pacing, circling round and round them, now almost at a run. "Say you lie or I will shoot you, too."

"He came to save me," she repeated and she heard the lock of his gun click. "Because we loved each other so," she continued and laughed softly, and stooping whispered to her unconscious husband that soon she would join him.

She waited expectant and nothing happened. She drew the unconscious body she held yet closer to her heart and called out:

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"Murderer! why don't you shoot? Eh, murderer, why don't you shoot?"

"I can't," came the muffled answer. "I've tried, but I can't. You've played it low down on me, Mrs. West, ma'am."

His tone was so despairing that she felt a momentary touch of pity—but only for a moment, for she had no thoughts to spare for any but her husband.

"I daresay," she answered and he stood gloomily, listening with jealous rage.

"Why shouldn't I kill you?" he said, and he came close to her. She was aware that he was approaching, but it did not occur to her to be afraid. She expected to die; and at that moment to her to die meant to join her husband and to be at rest. "I could skip across the border before sun-up," he said. "Why shouldn't I kill you?"

"How should I know?" she answered. "Be quick about it."

Very carefully he placed his gun on the ground at his feet and came up beside her. She could not see his face, but she felt his hands groping about her till they reached her throat and closed there. She made no attempt to struggle but sat quite still, placid and untroubled. She felt the grasp upon her throat tighten slowly and she began to find a difficulty in breathing. A slight smile appeared upon her lips and then without warning Deegan sprang away, leaving her free. She gave a quick sob, of relief, of bewilderment at finding herself still alive, of absolute disappointment. Deegan cried out to her with an angry oath.

"You don't give a cent," he complained; "not a red

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solitary cent. Here am I all afire and 'most crazy and what do you care? I might be an ox for all you mind. I wouldn't treat a dead dog the way you do me. You think I'm just here for you to wipe your feet on and it ain't square."

"But," she answered mildly; "I thought you were going to kill me?"

"I can't do it," he declared. "I wish to blazes I could, but I can't. You deserve it all right but I can't do it. I'm only a door-mat; I ain't a man hardly."

"Oh, I deserve it," she agreed. "I know that. But if you will not kill me, go to town for the doctor. There is perhaps some chance of life still, for I thought I felt his heart beat just now."

"Not I," said Deegan staring. "No, ma'am, not I."

"Either that or kill me," she said.

"I'd rather kill myself," he answered, and there was something in his tone that penetrated the ice of her indifference and made her feel the agony he experienced.

She rose and walked towards him and he waited for her; almost with defiance.

"I am very sorry," she said. "I am very—sorry. I beg your pardon."

He gasped a little at that; it was so unexpected.

"I would do anything to show how sorry I really am," she continued; "but I fear there is no possible way to make amends."

"Oh, yes; there is," he answered and she knew what he meant. But she glanced over her shoulder towards where her husband lay and Deegan noticing the gesture began to be ashamed.

"I have been very bad and wicked," she said; "and

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I am being punished for it. I wished for revenge and I have it. Oh, yes; I have revenged myself. As for my conduct to you, Mr. Deegan, it was very wrong and I am sorry and you will never forgive me. But at least I am truly sorry and I am heavily punished."

"Oh, quit," he said. "I ain't mad."

"You do not know," she continued; "how clearly I see things to-day. I used to think I was justified because I had been wronged—as though that gave me a right to wrong others. Or you."

"I will go for the doctor," he said, "because you're the only woman I'd ever give a snap of the fingers for. I reckon I do love you," he added meditatively; "so I'll go."

"You must not go for that," she said. "You must go simply because it is right."

Deegan stared at her, for this was subtle beyond him. But somehow it now seemed to her that she must be very strict. There was a reaction in her mind, and remembering with shame and with shudders the bargain she had once made with him, it seemed necessary to her that this time there must be no possibility of misunderstanding.

"What does it matter why?" he asked. "If I go, my reason don't cut no ice. And I reckon I'll go on account of you or not at all."

"There has been so much done wrong," said Mrs. West, "that I dare risk no more—not even to save him."

"Reckon I'll stay then," said Deegan.

Mrs. West looked at him sorrowfully, and he saw her face in the dim glow of the Aurora, sad and beseeching, unearthly in that changeful light. He steeled

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his heart against her, and said to himself that he was glad his rival lay dying. She had wrapped the unconscious man in a cloak and now she was trying to make him as comfortable as circumstances permitted and to staunch the bleeding from his wounds. Deegan watched her gloomily.

"He is dying," she said once.

"That's what I was after," he answered brutally. "What did you reckon I shot him for?"

"It was I who killed him," she answered.

"What do you mean?" he demanded uneasily, and then added: "Oh, blazes, if you're going to look like that I'll send the doctor. It won't do no good. But I'll do it though I hang through it. If you say you love me?"

"How can I?" she asked.

"Oh, I know it would be a lie," he answered. "There's no error about that. But I'd kinder like to know how it sounds just once. You say it and I'll clear for a doctor right away."

She hesitated. She looked down at the dear face in her lap. She groaned a little for it was a chance that was offered, of yet saving his life. She said in her mind that she would, but something rose up in her throat and she could not. She shook her head.

"Else he'll die," said Deegan.

She did not answer and they sat in silence. Above the Northern Lights flashed and flickered, running to and fro in the skies and throwing a varying radiance upon the earth beneath. The first circle of fire spread out and stretched all across the northern half of the heavens; with long streamers that shot out and back again, and changing colours that played continually in

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varying tints. Now and again a great wave of light would sweep all through the Aurora, and the streamers would dart out still further, and the colours grow more vivid, and the heavens and the earth would be illumined together. It might have seemed as though the gods rejoiced in high heaven and hung out signals of glad tidings to all the starry universe around.

"Oh, well," said Deegan. "Reckon must be, must be; since you're so set on it. Will you come to the hanging?"

Without waiting for an answer, either of gratitude or in reply to his bitter gibe, he went away quickly. By the light of the Aurora she saw him go and disappear quickly on the track towards town. Now she was alone with him she loved and a strange content possessed her and she whispered in his ear that she loved him—had always loved him even in the depths of her hate and longing for revenge.

So in the black darkness, when the Aurora had died away and the dawn had not yet come, the sleepy doctor found her. He did what he could there on the open prairie. Then he lifted the still unconscious man into the light cart he had come in and together they returned slowly to the town.

CHAPTER XXIX

JUST as the sun rose they reached their destination, and without delay John Leigh was removed to a bed in a comfortable room at Cameron's hotel. Recent events, concerning which rumours had already reached him, seemed to indicate the removal of Deegan's competition, and, overjoyed at this turn of Fortune's wheel, Cameron did all he could for the comfort of his rival's victim.

"You will take charge, then," said the doctor, turning to Mrs. West when he had done everything in his power for his patient. She did not answer immediately, and he added with a touch of sharpness in his manner at what he thought her hesitation, "It is necessary; he needs constant attention and there is no one at hand but you."

"Yes," she answered then; "oh, yes; I will take charge."

She did not say anything further, but to her mind this placing her husband in her charge appeared as a sign that at last the past was to be the past; forgotten and forgiven. She felt that no longer was there any barrier between them, but that now, after so many weary years, she stood again in her rightful place. With a caressing gesture she smoothed a tiny roughness from the pillow while the doctor, satisfied at her acceptance of the charge, gave her elaborate directions. She listened with care and then he went away, leaving her alone with her patient. Sitting down by the bed-side she looked about her, almost with

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an air of content; for after the last stormy days this little room that held them, together and alone, seemed the very ideal of peace and full of promise of quiet happiness to come. The sight of her husband lying so helpless and needing her so badly, dependent on her for everything after so long a separation, intensified this impression. She felt that here at least they were together, that here nothing could come between them.

She moved softly about the room doing what was necessary. As she went about these duties she looked lovingly at him, quiescent, helpless, enveloped in white bandages; and longing to express her love in actions, she rejoiced in the charge she held. In reaction from the despair of the night before things took on a rose-colour and she imagined that now everything would go smoothly. She said to herself that perhaps all had been for the best since things had so worked that now she was his nurse. What better opportunities for renewed trust, for reborn confidence, could there be than the long hours of convalescence? They would learn together to forget and in the shelter of her patient care love should grow again and for the future thrive in perfect trust. She had many happy dreams as she sat in this little quiet room, alone with him whose very life depended on her care. She anticipated with delight each moment when there was some duty to be done, a bandage to be arranged or a temperature to be noted. Although she felt little temptation to sleep, she was very exhausted. Her mind was a little dulled so that she found it easy to admit excuses for herself, and she dreamed; imagining that out of evil good had come as one might expect figs from thistles. She forgot that this is the Law: that all things done beneath the sun

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must be paid for ; some one way and some another, some sooner and some later, but for all indubitably a final payment in full.

The day passed quietly enough with her. She knew nothing of the eager gossip that buzzed through the little settlement, where ordinarily an extra letter in the mail was food for a week's comment. But of that nothing reached her, for when the doctor came he spoke only of his patient and she conversed with no one else. Nor did she leave the bedside or even take sleep except at odd moments when her husband seemed easier than usual. Several of the women made little attempts to penetrate to the sick room, declaring that Mrs. West must need rest ; but all such offers she firmly declined, declaring herself quite competent to do all that was necessary.

"You will break down yourself," said the doctor to her on the morning of the second day, but she shook her head almost indignantly.

"Not till he is quite out of danger," she answered quickly.

"Well, well, as you like," said the doctor, who had been examining the sufferer with great care and minuteness. "As you like," he repeated abstractedly. He was about to add something, but checked himself, remembering how keen and patient was the interest she took in the injured man. The doctor, though he did not understand what it was or choose to question her, was yet quite aware that there must be some connection between them. He did not wish to inquire too closely for fear of losing a competent and careful nurse, and now for the same reason he checked the words on the tip of his tongue. Soon after he went away.

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In the evening he returned and went again to see his patient, who was still unconscious most of the time and very weak. There was nothing he could do except see that favourable progress was being made, and yet he fidgeted about the room and took several occasions to praise her nursing, till at last Mrs. West became aware that he had something to say which he found difficult. She wondered what it was, and instantly she dreaded lest it might be something to disturb the peace that had been upon her these two days. It was clear he would not go till he had spoken and she braced herself for the shock. She did not attempt to guess what it was, but a sudden sick fear swept through her so that she could hardly retain her composure. She glanced at the doctor, at the small room grown familiar within forty-eight hours, a room that would always be to her a memory of peace after storm, and then at the suffering man whom she had tended so well and faithfully. She spoke with a sense of finality.

"What is it, doctor?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," he answered nervously and took up his hat. "And a better nurse," he said, "no one could find; no, not in Winnipeg Hospital."

"What is it?" she asked again.

"If he lives," he said, "the credit will be yours. 'And so I told her.'"

"Her? Who?" she asked, and knew the blow about to fall.

"Annie, 'Annie Leigh', his daughter, you know. She heard and rode over to the Icclander's to ask me, so I was bound to tell her all about it." He paused, took up a medicine bottle and examined it carefully; then added

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in a detached manner of criticism: "A nice girl, a real nice girl, but she has a temper of her own all right."

"What did she say?"

"She is coming to-morrow."

"Well, she can go back again," flashed Mrs. West.

"She has been nursing Arthur Briscoe, you know, and is pretty well played out. I advised her to take a rest, but she said she would come to-morrow." He hesitated a little, awkwardly as though expecting further protest and then made for the door. "But after all," he added, "she is his daughter, you know, and so has, one might say, a legal right so to speak. One must not forget that."

"Of course we must not forget that," echoed Mrs. West. "There is the question of right—of legal right—to be considered."

"And you need a rest," said the doctor, encouraged at this sign of agreement. "Need it badly, too. So it's just as well maybe."

"Maybe," repeated Mrs. West again, and the doctor felt glad that she was taking her threatened deposition so quietly. He even blamed himself for an undefined impression he had had that Annie's appearance was likely to lead to a serious disagreement. "You see, she seemed so set on nursing him I quite expected there would be real bad trouble," as he observed later on. Now, therefore, he felt very relieved at her easy reception of the news and cast about in his mind to say something that might please her. So he praised her nursing a little while; she listened in silence and then he added: "I hear they have track of Deegan."

"Track of Deegan?" she said bewildered. "Why? Who?"

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"The police, of course; they've been hunting for him, you know."

"Hunting for him?" she echoed in surprise, for before it had not occurred to her that the attempted murder of John Leigh would put Deegan in serious jeopardy. "For this?" she said with horror.

"Of course," he said impatiently. "Do you think we let people get shot like this and never say a word? The police have been hunting for him everywhere."

She did not answer and he went away. She sat down on a chair close by and it no longer seemed to her that peace abode in that little room. She was oppressed with fear of what was next to happen; of the further consequences of her deeds. She saw nothing clearly, but was vaguely yet terribly afraid, like an animal trapped, expecting it knows not what of ill and suffering.

"How things do go on happening," she exclaimed with a distinct sense of injustice. Now she desired nothing so much as to lead a new life of peace and quietness, and yet these past deeds seemed to threaten to arise again and thrust her back into strife and tumult. "One thing after another," she muttered. "What must I do if Deegan is captured? And Annie, too. But Annie is a kind, good girl. I think she will understand and forgive the past."

She looked towards her husband and going softly to his side smoothed his pillow and did little unnecessary things that she thought might perhaps increase his comfort. She did them all with extreme lightness of touch, and yet with an air that spoke wholly of restrained strength and forceful energy.

"She shall not take him from me," she said aloud. "She shall not, shall not, shall not."

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As she bent above him he stirred and mumbled to himself. The words were not distinguishable, though she tried hard to make them out. Then she stooped still nearer to him, whispering "Connie" in his ear, and she smiled with triumph when he caught up the name and repeated it over and over again. She spread out her arms over the bed as though to shield him from some harm, or as though to warn off some intruder.

"And she has her Arthur," she murmured. "He should be enough for her. She must not interfere with us."

None the less she was uneasy and she took to pacing up and down the room, though with infinite softness of tread and every precaution to avoid disturbing the sick man.

"Yet she must feel that I have wronged her," she muttered after long silence. "Deeply, deeply, and she must feel that. Yet she will forgive; she is a good girl, she will, she must. I will tell her I am sorry; I will beg her pardon. Oh, she must forgive me then." She paused. She stood by the bedside in an unconscious attitude of defiance and her face took on a darker look. "And if not," she said slowly, "I will tell her all the truth and show who really has the better right to be here."

CHAPTER XXX

UNTIL the morning of the next day Mrs. West was left undisturbed. Though John Leigh's condition was still very serious, it had improved slightly, thanks to her patient care. During her vigil by his bedside Mrs. West found ample opportunity for thinking and in those long, quiet hours she was not able to resist the thoughts and memories that swarmed in upon her mind. She remained fully determined not to yield her privilege of position, and though she chiefly trusted to Annie's kindness yet in the recesses of her mind was always present the memory of her secret to be used in case of necessity.

"It is my right," she said to herself and yet shuddered at the thought of the distress and sorrow such a disclosure of her mother's life must cause to Annie. "Besides, I have injured her so much already," she murmured to herself. She repeated many times in her mind that no such necessity would arise, that Annie would be merciful, would forgive her, must forgive her. It seemed to Mrs. West that Annie was too good and kind to refuse forgiveness. Perhaps it was some sense of her own past hardness and the misery it had caused, that made her so certain of Annie's mercy; perhaps really there existed more doubt in her mind than she would confess even to herself. Several times she planned little speeches of re-

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penitance that must, she felt, touch Annie's heart and she took a kind of pleasure in her determination to express openly her sorrow. It was at least one step towards making amends. "And, after all, Annie is not at all hard," said Mrs. West to herself.

Waiting Annie's appearance with this degree of nervous anxiety, expecting to see her every time the door opened or there was a movement in the corridor outside, it is no wonder that when the girl did come Mrs. West was entirely unprepared. She had taken up a little sewing with the feeling that the monotonous occupation might soothe her excitement, and her reel of cotton had fallen, rolling under the bed. She had to go down on her hands and knees to recover it, and as she rose again she faced Annie standing in the doorway.

"Oh," she cried, taken by surprise and cast about in her mind for some appropriate phrase.

Then Annie spoke, and the bitter word made Mrs. West start and flush and then go very pale.

"Shameless," she said in a low whisper that her father might not be disturbed. "Oh, have you no shame that you stay here?"

"I am nursing him," answered Mrs. West, a sudden consciousness of guilt weighing on her tongue; and yet with an anger at the other's manner of blazing contempt.

"Nursing him?" repeated Annie with infinite scorn. "Why, if he came back to consciousness and found *you* here, the shock might—"

She went on tip-toe to the bed and gazed down at the inanimate figure, the face hidden by cross bandages. She turned to Mrs. West, her eyes afire. She did not speak, but she motioned to the door with a superb gesture.

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"I am nursing him," repeated Mrs. West sullenly.

"Not now," answered Annie. "Oh, how can you stay here to watch what you have done?"

"I did not shoot him," came the hurried reply.

"You did not pull the trigger, perhaps. But I know. I do not understand why, but Arthur has told me, Jim Cross has told me. I know who has done all these things, who caused the burning of the farm, the shooting, the—attempt to ruin Arthur. I do not know how you could or why, but I do know the police ought to be hunting for you and not for your wretched accomplice. Now go—and quietly, or you may disturb him."

"I will not go. I am his nurse. What do you know of nursing? You are too young—he might die."

"You shall not nurse him another minute. You have done enough harm."

"I will not go. I am his nurse. I have a right—the best right. Do you hear—I have a right?"

"You shall go," repeated Annie, to whom this proclamation of a right was meaningless, "though I have to tell the men and have you carried out by main force."

The two women faced each other with direct and furious eyes. Both breathed quickly and both voiced their rage in gentle whispers, since neither forgot for even one moment that the sick man must not be disturbed.

"You dare not," retorted Mrs. West. "If you do, there is something I can tell. I have nursed him three days."

"You should not if I had known before."

"The doctor says that I have nursed him well—that he would have died but for my care."

"You deceived me once—once I would have trusted you with anything or everything. I talked to you—oh, oh—I

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talked to you of Arthur and you were planning such things against him. I do not understand you, but you must go—you shall go.”

Mrs. West did not answer, for there was a truth in this accusation that held her speechless. She remained silent and Annie watched her with implacable resolve. So they remained for a moment or two, and the girl's face showed no sign of weakening. An anger began to grow in Mrs. West's heart, but she determined to try first an appeal for forgiveness. After all, if she expressed her sorrow and repentance, the sorrow and repentance she so truly felt, surely Annie could not but forgive her. It would cost her an effort to confess her wrong-doing like that, but she was fully prepared. After all, Annie had always seemed gentle and kind; surely she must recognize the sincerity of expressed repentance—surely she could not withhold forgiveness in the face of open confession.

“Listen, Annie,” she said gently, her voice losing its tone of sharp defiance. “I am older than you—much older—there are things perhaps you do not understand. I know I have done wrong—very wrong—but you do not know how truly I repent. You must forgive me, Annie. I will try and make amends and undo the past as much as I can. I am very, very sorry; and now, Annie, I, who am old enough to be your mother, I ask of you forgiveness. If you will try and trust—”

“I do not want to listen,” interrupted Annie. “I know what you have done. Now it only remains for you to go away.”

“You do not understand. I have been wronged, too.”

“Who has burned your farm? Or kidnapped you? Or enticed you into a trap? Or tempted you to commit mur-

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der? Or played on one man's affections to ruin another?
Or—"

"Stop, oh, stop," cried Mrs. West, and put up her hands as though to ward off these rushing accusations. "Have I done all that?" she asked.

"Have you not?" demanded Annie, and Mrs. West did not answer. Annie came nearer. Her eyes flashed with a new fire and she towered above the older woman, who sank down before her rage, crouching on a chair. "Did you not?" she demanded, hissing in whispers the words that she could have shrieked with the agony that inspired them. "Did you not try to thrust Arthur, my Arthur, Arthur Briscoe back into the hell of drink?"

Still Mrs. West made no answer but her lips moved convulsively. She put out her hand and clutched at the girl's dress, and in her mind there passed the fleeting thought that thus had once her husband caught at hers. Annie snatched it quickly from her, and this again seemed to her a replica of her own long past action.

"Ah, but," she murmured with dry lips, "you must, you must forgive."

"Who could forgive such things?" answered Annie, and yet again, with a strange awe, Mrs. West recognized the ghost of a long dead moment.

"But you must," she insisted; "it is so wrong not to forgive. Look! I know I did wrong, but I ask your pardon on my knees." And as she spoke she slid from her chair to a kneeling position.

"I am not a man to be played on like that," said Annie contemptuously.

She went to the door and opening it stood outside in the passage, beckoning to Mrs. West. Though not quite un-

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derstanding the motive, Mrs. West joined her, and Annie closed the door so that they both stood in the passage just outside. Annie still held the handle of the door, ready to return. "We must not risk disturbing him," she said.

"No," repeated Mrs. West dully; "there must be no risk of disturbing him."

"If you are not out of the house in thirty minutes," continued Annie, speaking very slowly, "I shall tell all I know. And then I do not think the town will be a healthy place for you to stay in."

"Is there nothing I can say that will touch you?" said Mrs. West, and the anger hidden in her heart began to grow. She felt again that this was an interloper, and she was hungry—she starved—to continue her care of the sick man.

"Absolutely nothing," said Annie with a hard decision in her tones. "You are bad and shameless. You must go."

"Though I tell you how sorry I am?" asked Mrs. West again, and in her mind she said that this was Annie's last chance. Her face lost its sad and downcast expression and began to flush red with her rising anger. She held herself more upright. "You are very young," she said. "I tell you that no one who has done wrong has ever repented more deeply or suffered more keenly. You do not understand all the circumstances; but, I beg of you, I implore you, humbly, humbly and deeply—"

"It is no use," said Annie inflexibly. "You talked me over once to believe in you, but not again. I know your wickedness now."

"I only ask to nurse him till he is out of danger," said Mrs. West. Her tone was gloomy and she spoke more

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from a desire to exhaust every other expedient before the last, rather than from any hope of success. Annie shook her head and Mrs. West spoke again. "I do not wish to do it," she said, and in her voice was a note of sombre warning that impressed Annie a little, though her purpose never wavered. To her Mrs. West was simply a danger and an evil that must be removed at all risks. There was silence for a few moments while Mrs. West hesitated before she spoke the irrevocable words that would strike down Annie's resistance, prove who had the right to the post of nurse and declare to the daughter her mother's shame.

"In half an hour from now," said Annie and held out her father's watch which she had picked up as she left the room.

"You will not let me nurse him?" repeated Mrs. West, and the words to declare herself his first and only wife trembled on her lips.

"Never," answered Annie.

"Very well," said Mrs. West and she came still nearer. Annie held the watch in her hand and the chain hung down, from its end dangling a little locket. Mrs. West saw it and the sight of it stirred old memories. She knew the locket well—who better?—it had been her own gift to him before their marriage and once it had held her own portrait. Somehow the circumstance affected her strongly. She put out her hand as though to take it, but Annie swiftly drew it away.

"Don't," she said.

"Why not?" asked Mrs. West, for the moment supposing that Annie had some glimmering of the truth.

"It holds my mother's photograph," said Annie softly.

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"How then do you suppose I could let you nurse him? Even if you were not so bad, it is my place and right since she is dead."

It was a direct challenge and so Mrs. West took it. It surprised her that she perceived in herself a reluctance to take it up. This annoyed her even through the pain she felt to know her portrait displaced. She called up her resolution, thinking that she must not give way to any weakness.

"At least I will have some of my rights," she muttered; "though he did take from me so much."

"You shall not pass, I will call the men," said Annie, who had not caught the muttered words, but perceived a movement as to return.

"Let me nurse him," said Mrs. West, "or I shall say something that will make you miserable all your life."

Annie held her head higher.

"Say what you like," she answered. "I shall call the men in eighteen minutes."

In Mrs. West there was a struggle; often she decided to speak, as often she hesitated anew. She intended to speak, she wished to speak, she held it weak folly to hesitate; and yet something held her back, controlled her will almost against herself. So often lately she had followed her own desire and found it lead her into strange places. She had, too, an odd feeling of fellowship, of kindred with this girl, who, like herself, might find existence poisoned on life's threshold. And already she had once at least striven hard to injure her. Deliberately she tried to force herself to speak but she could not. She shrank from it. She had a clear vision of what such a discovery must mean to Annie, proud and upright, with ideals born

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of solitude. The words died on her lips, the intention died in her heart—and from the death was resignation born and true repentance.

“You have now five minutes,” said Annie.

Mrs. West started to know she had been wrestling so long in that silent struggle. Without a word she turned and went down the stairs, with head bent and blinding tears so that she stumbled, and Annie watched her without pity. At the bottom she stopped and glanced upwards with faint, involuntary appeal; but Annie still stood implacable, holding the watch in her hand.

She went on along the passage and out by the back way through the hotel yard, and on over the prairie till she reached a little group of willows, surrounding a small slough. There she lay down because she could go no further, and remained tearless but shaking with dry sobs, remembering with a faint but clear recollection how a little while before she had heard without pity another woman’s sorrowful sobbing. It seemed to her that all she had made others suffer was returning upon herself with a keener edge and a sharper pang.

CHAPTER XXXI

MRS. WEST lay still, as miserable, as motionless, through the long hours of the day, heeding nothing, careless of the hot rays of the afternoon sun, careless of the cold as the night drew near. Sadly she lay, watching the roofs of the village that were plainly visible in the distance, and picturing to herself the room that held her husband. She hoped that the doctor would go there early so that Annie might receive all necessary instructions without any delay, and sometimes she troubled herself with wondering whether this thing would be done or that. But mostly she lay in a kind of stupor of despair, remembering only how she had sinned, conscious only of the penalty she suffered. It shows well how absolutely crushed she was by late events that she felt no anger against Annie. A little while before, lesser things would have thrown her into a frenzy of passion, but to-day she endured with meekness.

So heedless was she of outward impressions that she did not know the sun was near to setting, or that a man was approaching her. He came cautiously, slinking from bluff to slough, from slough to bluff, in the fashion of a man with keen reasons for avoiding observation. At last he reached the willow bushes where she lay, and from behind one of them he watched her with surprise and aching sympathy. He wondered greatly whether there

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were anything he could do to help her, and in the sight of her misery he forgot the anger he had held against her.

"Say," he whispered. "Mrs. West, ma'am, what's on now?"

He crept forward so as to be nearer to her, but still she did not hear him. He touched her on the shoulder and she glanced round in an uninterested way, showing no surprise to recognize Deegan again.

"See here," he said. "Don't you take on, don't fret that way. After all, it ain't no manner of use punching a dead bull."

So desolate and lonely did Mrs. West feel, an impression intensified by the vast bare prairies bounded only by the coming night, that she felt very grateful for his words of consolation, rough and uncouth as they were. She looked at him with a little interest and saw that he himself was in evident trouble. His eyes were restless and bloodshot, and the flesh hung loosely on his once plump cheeks. His clothes were no longer neat, his shirt was torn and stained, while his gay tie had disappeared altogether. He presented a very different appearance now from the prosperous townsman of only a few days before. She noticed that his boots were tied up with binder twine.

"But you," she said; "have you not been home? You look—look—"

"Sort of a tramp," he answered with a little laugh. "Reckon maybe I do."

"But why?" she asked, groping in her mind that was so absorbed in her own troubles. In spite of what the doctor had told her she had never really understood how serious his position was.

"Oh, I've been out on the loose a while," he answered

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quickly, seeing she did not quite realize the state of affairs. Again that vein of delicacy that ran, deep and solitary, through his tangled character, asserted itself. He spoke quickly for fear she might guess the truth and understand that he suffered for the things she had made him do. "I'm all right," he said; "nothing the matter with me. What about you?"

"Oh," she cried, his ruse succeeding instantly. "They have turned me out, they have turned me out; she has taken my place and in all the world I am alone."

"No, ma'am," he said gently. "Not alone while I live."

"Oh, you," she answered him, not with any contempt but with an indifference so complete that it hurt him as much—or more. She forgot his presence soon and went on murmuring to herself: "Turned out, turned out. She has taken my place like her mother before her."

"How are you fixed, ma'am?" asked Deegan. "Where are you goin' to-night?"

"I don't know," she answered absently, but he repeated the question, thrusting it on her attention till she roused herself a little and said impatiently: "Oh, let me alone. I don't know. How am I fixed, do you say? I have what I stand in and—" She emptied her pocket on the grass. "There is my wealth," she said, and added, recognizing the sympathy in his voice, "You are kind to trouble."

He counted the money with care and then returned it to her.

"I have \$300," he said. "Grabbed all the cash I could before I cleared. What are you goin' to do, ma'am?"

"I do not know and I do not care."

He looked at her long and carefully, noting the dull despair in her manner and yet pleased to know that he

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had roused her enough to make her answer. And she had said that he was very kind. A sort of excitement, a restrained eagerness began to appear in his manner and he fidgeted nervously before he spoke again.

"They have turned you out?" he said.

"Yes."

"They have cast you off?"

"Yes."

"You never want to see them again?"

"They never want to see me again."

"And a pretty slack outfit they are," he cried, repressing other words that would have seemed to him more appropriate. "A dirty, mean trick," he cried again with heat.

"But you know what I have done?" she said with some surprise.

"What's that matter? If I was him, do you reckon I'd let a bushelful of things like that trouble me one little bit? No, ma'am, not by a long way."

She continued to look at him in grave surprise, wrinkling her brows in thought.

"But," she said, after a pause, "I have ruined you, too. And treated you as badly—or worse."

"That don't amount to anything at all," he answered earnestly. "I may have felt sore—maybe so, maybe so—but not after I saw you was feelin' bad. No, ma'am, not me. If you feel bad, that wipes all out." He made a sweeping gesture with his hand. "It clears the board," he said briefly.

She listened with a feeling of admiration for a constancy so complete, with a strange feeling of comfort, too, to know that all the world did not hold her abhorred, and

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with an odd, almost freakish desire to discover how far his devotion would carry him.

"But I was not sorry about you," she said, and noticed that he winced a little. She continued: "When I first met you, you were prosperous and respected. Now you are practically ruined and I understand the mounted police are searching for you. And it is my doing."

"Not all," he answered. "I took a hand myself. But anyway, that don't cut no ice. That fellow's gone back on you. I ain't. You played it pretty low down on us both. I ain't denying that—it's a fact, you did so. So he's gone back on you but I ain't. That shows, as I figure it, that I love you more'n he does. Mrs. West, ma'am, I've asked you to marry me three times and this makes four. Will you, ma'am?"

"After all that I have done?" she asked with a kind of wonder, and also with an eagerness to hear his answer that he saw and that set him wildly hoping.

"Yes," he answered, and he was well aware that the prompt answer pleased and relieved her. There was the ghost of a smile on her lips and her face was brighter. He went on rapidly. "We can skip across the border. Or you can train to Denver and I'll meet you there. It ain't no trouble to me to dodge them mounted police, but you might play out."

His hope was so plain and his manner so eager that she recognized suddenly that she had given him an impression she by no means desired. For in wishing to test how far he still loved her, she was actuated by only one motive. In her mind had risen a thought of which she had been but half conscious yet which nevertheless had made her speak as she did—that if Deegan could love her

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so long and so deeply and forgive her so willingly, so perhaps might John Leigh when he returned to consciousness. Now seeing the expectant eagerness in his face she was touched with pity that she must give him a fresh disappointment, do him a new injury.

"But I am married, my husband is still alive," she said hastily, giving the most conclusive reason she could think of.

"Yes," said Deegan regretfully; "them shot-guns are dandies for hittin', you can't hardly miss if you want to; but likely as not there ain't no really permanent effects after all."

"But aren't you—if he dies—died—it would have been murder."

"He meant to kill me anyway. But that don't amount to much; I'll do more'n that if you say so. Mrs. West, ma'am, I love you and I don't reckon to go back on what I say. He has turned you out. Come to me, then, come to me and you shall never want for anything I can give you." He held out his hands to her and his face was transfigured with emotion. "And I have proved I love you," he said softly.

She saw clearly the eagerness in his face as he waited for her answer. And she was tempted, deeply tempted, for she felt very weak and lonely, cut off from all she desired. Her heart was sad and sore within her; instinctively it longed for healing and consolation. But for Deegan, she stood absolutely alone, a figure of scorn and hatred (she said to herself) to him to whom she was nearest by natural ties. That prime necessity of all, that deepest of all needs, the need for affection, to love and to be loved, rose strongly in her. She remembered Annie's

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abrupt anger; it seemed to her that for ever she was out-cast from her husband's side, that as Annie had thought so would he. At her side, waiting eagerly for her reply, was one who at least had proved his affection; who knew all and yet still offered her his love. And she had injured him, was it not her plain duty to make him amends?

"No, no," she cried aloud and started with surprise to hear her own decision.

"But you've left him," said Deegan eagerly, for her long pause had increased his hopes. "For good and all," he urged again.

"Yes," she answered dully; "for good, for ill, for ever."

"We can get a divorce—a good, square, legal divorce—as easy as rollin' off a log if that's what's bothering you. In Oklahoma, you know, or somewhere."

"It is not that," she answered.

"Then come with me. Come."

"You see—I love him still," she answered, and then Deegan understood that his pleadings were hopeless.

The darkness came to them, wrapping the wide prairie in its soft arms. At a distance a twinkling light or two showed where the town lay. Mrs. West watched longingly this far-off glimmer that typified to her all that she had lost—that seemed in a way a tiny link still binding her to the past. From the darkness came Deegan's voice, gloomy and sombre.

"Sure as shootin'," he said, "you'll go back to him."

"Ah, no," she cried and put up her hands to soothe her leaping heart. "He cannot love me again; that is not possible."

She could not see him now but she heard his voice, his words coming slowly; to her fancy charged with a verita-

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ble coldness so that she shivered as he spoke. "You don't know," he said, "the thoughts that I have. You've gone back on me, and I can't do a thing though I've tried. There's only the hotel now. And I can't go there." He paused and she dared make no answer. He cried out suddenly: "He may get you, he shan't get my hotel that I made and built myself. That's mine, all mine, and no other man shall touch it."

"Is there nothing I can do to make amends, nothing?" cried Mrs. West. For almost the first time her mind was stirred from herself and her own sorrows to understand the agony another suffered. "Oh," she cried, weeping, "I have always loved him even when I hated him—most when I hated him."

He sighed as he listened and her tears fell fast—gracious tears that were for another's pain.

"God help me," she said; "and there is nothing I can do."

"Nothin'," he answered simply; "thank you all the same. But not even God Almighty can undo the past."

She shrank together at that saying, for it sounded dreadful in her ears. He moved away into the darkness and soon even the sound of his footsteps ceased so that she was quite alone. Solitary in the blackness of the night the little distant light twinkled at her with a faint message of hope.

CHAPTER XXXII

MRS. WEST had not moved from her position when an hour later she again heard Deegan's voice softly calling to her.

"I thought you had gone," she said as he drew near.

"I've come back," he said. "It's too soon yet for my job." She made him no answer and presently he continued: "Say, I can show you how to get even with them if you want to."

"With whom?" she asked, though she knew well enough.

"A while back I happened across a green young Englishman from Daly's. He'd got lost. He had a message for the doctor that that young fellow Briscoe's gone bad again—seems soon as Annie Leigh cleared to her pa—and you—he tried to get around a bit and got cold and now he's a most mighty sick man. So I said I knew where the doc. was, over at the Iclander's, and would take the message, and the young greenhorn went home again. But he says Briscoe's terrible sick and will die sure thing unless some one who knows takes hold right away. So now you know. What are you goin' to do about it?"

"That is owing to me, also," she muttered under her breath.

"It's your say," continued Deegan, who had not understood her half uttered words. "You can tell the girl if

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you like and she'll be in a fix then, for she won't know which to go to, and you can watch her wriggle or chip in to help. Or you can lie low and say nothin'. Then he'll die likely and you'll be quits with Annie Leigh."

He laughed with extraordinary harshness as he spoke and she echoed him with mirth as discordant as his own.

"I'm beaten," she said. "It does not even tempt me. There is only one thing I could do. It's no merit, for I cannot help it; and, oh, I am so tired of being wicked."

"I don't—" began Deegan. "How do you—I don't follow."

"I must go and nurse Briscoe myself and tell them their note to the doctor miscarried. I am so sorry, Mr. Deegan, for what I have done to you—so sorry—but not even God Almighty can undo the past."

"Don't you want to get even with Annie Leigh," he asked disappointedly.

"I shall never get even with Annie," she answered. "But now I'm going to try." She put out her hand in the darkness and took his. "Good-bye," she said.

"Good-bye," he answered.

They turned and walked away in opposite directions; she rapidly to where Arthur Briscoe lay wrestling almost in the throes of death; he sauntering slowly toward the silent town, where there was neither light nor sound to show that any yet stirred.

"Now I must go and burn the hotel," said Deegan to himself as he went slowly along the trail to the town. "And then I shall go and walk, for ever and ever. Amen." He knew the way well and went on steadily, still murmuring to himself. "I nearly killed her with my hands about her throat," he said. "But I couldn't. So now—" As

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he went slowly along he murmured continually to himself: "Walk and walk and walk, for ever and ever. Amen."

He felt a little like a man in a dream, though indeed the dream that he had dreamed so long was now finished and done with. But everything seemed to him to bear a touch of unreality and it was as though his life had gone backwards, back twenty years to the days when he had been a penniless outcast. He thought of the time when he had roved hither and thither, with no care or worry beyond the procuring of the next meal, with no need to exert his mind about anything. He felt very worn out and he wished to go away and wander on; on and on for ever, resting here, perhaps, and staying there, but always moving and always untroubled by work or care.

"There was only her and the hotel," he muttered. "She won't have me and no one shall have the hotel. Then I'll go back to the road again."

It presented itself to him as a consolation that no one should follow him at the hotel. At least that was his and no one should replace him there. His feelings repulsed by Mrs. West turned to thoughts of his hotel—the work of his own hands—with a kind of fierceness.

Sheltered by the night and aided by his intimate acquaintance with the ground, he made his way to the back door of the hotel. He tried it and found it only on the latch and though this was to him the greatest help and convenience, none the less the suggestion of carelessness annoyed him greatly and even served to confirm his purpose. For a little while he stood there, hesitating and listening, and then yielding to a sudden impulse he went slowly and cautiously round the hotel, feeling the walls as he went, recognizing almost every plank and muttering

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continually to himself. Memories came to him connected with almost every step he took. Round this corner was an ugly knot-hole that once had vexed him; he felt for it and found it, like meeting with an old, familiar friend. Here, at the corner of the verandah, was a broken rail. Billy Benson's rig had done that. He remembered how indignant he had been and how Billy had tried to excuse himself. Was it possible—was it really possible—that that had happened a bare three months ago? Here, a little further on, was a plank that he remembered well; in shaping it his axe had glanced and gashed his leg—he had the scar still.

Thus he went, slowly circling the building, remembering almost each separate nail, walking in the darkness with an assured foot since he knew every inch of the ground, every stone or clod of earth, and presently he found himself at the back again.

"Good old hotel," he muttered. "Gosh! I don't believe you'd like having another boss one little bit better'n I would."

Now he became busy, passing with a wonderful stealthy swiftness between the hotel and the stable, carrying huge armfuls of fragrant hay till all about the lower part of the house it was piled up in great loose heaps. Presently he paused and glanced round him at the result of his work with satisfaction. "Now for the coal oil," he said aloud. He went down to the cellar and presently reappeared with a bucket filled with oil which he poured over one of the piles of hay. "Nothing like practice," he said grimly. "I reckon I'm makin' a better job of it this time."

This operation he repeated several times till he had emptied the barrel of all the oil it contained. Then

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slipping off his shoes he went slowly up the stairs, wishing to warn any occupants of the house before starting the fire. He knew that the flames would spread with great rapidity, fed by the oil-sprinkled hay. The first room he entered was his own and unoccupied, but even in the darkness he could tell that it had been lately disturbed.

"Police hunting for clues likely," he muttered, hitting on the truth. He went on to the next room. That, too, was empty, and the third was the one Mrs. West had used. At the door he hesitated long, but finally he entered and this time he lighted a lamp. He looked about him with sad eyes, and with an odd, guilty feeling of intrusion. "Seems as though I hadn't ought to be here," he said, with one last look that fastened every detail in his memory. He noticed on the bureau an odd glove lying. It was small and of delicate kid, and he picked it up awkwardly, with something like reverence. He looked at it carefully, admiring it, noticing its narrow length and touching each one of its four buttons in succession.

"Things might have been kind of different," he muttered and gently placed the glove inside his coat. "But after all, if I am sneakin' round my own house, scary for fear of the police, why, it's on account of her. She will know I loved her all right and maybe she'll always be a bit sorry about it."

He heard a slight noise behind him just then and turning faced in the doorway Pierre, the little Frenchman, his mouth gaping with his astonishment. Immediately Deegan's pistol was in his hand and he said fiercely:

"If you speak, I'll fire."

"No, no, M'sieur," cried Pierre, crouching and holding

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up his hands as though to shelter himself. "No, no, M'sieur; *Ah, non.*"

"Well, then, shut your mouth," said Deegan impatiently, and by a threatening gesture quenched the other's voluble protests. "Now, tell me," he continued as Pierre began to understand that his life was not to be immediately sacrificed, "who else is sleeping here?"

"Not no one," answered Pierre, whose fear was driving from him his English so that he began to scatter French phrases through his words. "They have all departed, gone, M'sieur."

"But George—the bar-tender?"

"M'sieurs the police have been here to-day and George he departed fast in a hustle."

"Likely took all the cash with him," observed Deegan.

"*Certainement,*" replied Pierre. "M'sieurs the police searched everywhere and asked such questions so that all departed. But me—I remained."

"So," said Deegan. "Well, move along, Frenchy."

Making Pierre precede him, Deegan, who carried the lamp in one hand and his pistol in the other, went down the stairs. In the passage below he stood still for some moments, looking round him with intent interest, raising and lowering the lamp at intervals so as to get better views of each particular spot. He remembered as though it were an hour ago his pride when first he had walked along that passage, the hotel's sole owner.

Pierre watched him with surprise and fear, for the piled heaps of hay and the strong smell of coal oil were evidence enough of Deegan's intentions.

"Now," said Deegan, turning on him sharply, "you want to skip outer this quicker'n most anything and don't

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you play no monkey tricks or I'll get you, sure as shootin'. Open that door."

Gladly Pierre obeyed and the fresh night air rushed in, rustling the heaped-up hay.

"May I depart away, M'sieur?" he asked, hesitating on the threshold.

"Mind now, if you say a word, I'll shoot. Now clear."

Pierre needed no second order. With a leap he was through the door and his footsteps sounded loudly as he fled down the road. A number of dogs, hearing him, began to bark.

"What a racket," exclaimed Deegan angrily. "But I reckon he's scared all right—scared outer more'n a week's growth. I've got to get a move on, though, with them dogs all started."

He put his pistol back in his pocket, drew himself up to his full height, swung the lamp he held in a hissing circle round his head, and then dashed it against the wall. It broke into little pieces and the oil it held scattered in a fiery rain. Instantly flames leaped up, roaring in the very moment of their birth as they rushed along the piles of oil-soaked hay. They ran up the dry partition walls; they took instant hold upon the wooden floor; they were fanned, too, by the draught from the open door. In one moment, almost, the passage became a burning, fiery furnace.

Deegan ran outside, for already the heat was too great to bear, and a flame leaped out after him and burned his coat. In the verandah he paused and suddenly pressed his lips against the dry wood.

"Good-bye," he said; "now I'm a tramp again, a hobo,

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a deadbeat again. Good-bye, twenty years. Guess it's all over."

He turned and ran and as he ran the flames from the swiftly burning hotel cast a flickering light about him, and made an uncertain shadow that went before his feet. But he never looked around or heeded anything. He heard voices and a growing noise behind him; he heard a running to and fro and the excited barking of the dogs. He went on steadily and swiftly, sometimes slackening to a walk, but never stopping.

Deegan had a strong suspicion that the police would be on the look out for him at all the railway stations, but he knew a spot on the track about six miles distant where there was a steep incline so that the trains went up it at a reduced speed, and he believed that an eastward freight was due there about the time he would arrive. All the feelings and instincts of his early life were returning to him, fast wiping out the acquired habits of his twenty years of prosperity. This did not astonish him in the least. It appeared to him that he had sojourned in strange places, but that now he was returned to his own. Mrs. West, the hotel, all his settled life, seemed to fade into the remote distance, to take on a quality of vague, far-distant visions, almost as of something that had happened in another existence. It was as though he had escaped from an enchanted dream.

Presently he reached the railway and chose a position about half way up the incline. He had timed himself well and had not long to wait before the train appeared in the distance, puffing towards him. He crouched down so as to see against the sky each car as it passed, and

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presently selecting one, he leaped with skill and judgment, alighting in safety and without noise.

"Dandy jump, that," said a voice close by.

"I never miss my jump," answered Deegan boastfully, recognizing that the speaker was a tramp like himself and like himself stealing a ride on the train. "I ain't no green hand."

"So I presumed when I saw you jump," answered the stranger mildly. "Got a chew?"

Deegan handed him a plug of tobacco and then at his invitation crawled beneath the tarpaulin that served as a shelter both against the weather and against discovery. They began to talk together, Deegan inquiring about the crew of the train and their attitude toward such unauthorized passengers as themselves. They went on to talk about other brakemen and their ways, the brutality of this one, the easy going disposition of another, the meanness of a third, who would make any tramp he found empty his pockets and then throw him off if the results were not satisfactory—and sometimes if they were. Deegan found to his astonishment that a certain "Ginger Jim" whom he remembered as particularly hated by the tramping fraternity was still an object of terror to them. "Threw a feller off goin' at full speed on a down gradient and pelted him with coal as far as he could reach only a week ago," said Deegan's new friend, bitterly.

Thus the conversation ran on, drifting from brakemen to the open country with talk about the places where a meal was certain, and other places to be avoided; how here a vicious dog was kept, but it was all right if you could manage to speak to the folk before being chased off; and of how here the man was bitter hard, but if he was

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out of the way the wife could be relied on for an extra good meal. So they talked and presently the stranger observed, pointing towards a red glare in the sky:

"Seems like a fire over there."

"Seems so," agreed Deegan.

"Must be a fair size, too. I'd have got off if I'd known. I always like to be around when there's a fire. 'Most always there's somethin' to be picked up and if there ain't you can get a meal for miles round by tellin' about it. An' it's fun to watch, too."

"Oh, yes," said Deegan slowly, "it's fun to watch all right."

He began to talk again in the jargon of their profession that was all returning to him with such strange rapidity, and his companion answered him with fresh experiences. The train rattled on its way, the two men crouched beneath the tarpaulin gossipped on, growing silent only when footsteps warned them that some member of the train crew was passing along the cars. Continually Deegan's hand went to his breast to touch a glove that lay hidden there.

CHAPTER XXXIII

NEARLY a week passed without further incident. Under Mrs. West's patient care, that never relaxed or slackened for one moment, Briscoe soon recovered the ground his impatience had lost. It happened that the weather now became stormy with strong winds and frequent snowfalls so that communication with the town was rendered difficult. The doctor came out once, but Briscoe seemed to be progressing so favourably that he decided not to come again till the weather cleared, unless any unexpected need arose.

Before leaving, Annie had asked that news of Briscoe's progress might be sent to her regularly. Messages were accordingly dispatched whenever occasion served—though that was seldom—but by Mrs. West's particular request nothing was said of her presence. The only news she herself received during this time was the doctor's ambiguous assurance that her husband showed "no strikingly unfavourable symptoms, though his progress was not by any means rapid."

Thus the slow days dragged on. Mrs. West nursed Briscoe with a care and devotion not Annie could have exceeded; and waited with outward patience to hear how her husband fared, tended by another's hands. Bitter as it was to her, she never flinched in the course she had chosen, but it was with sickening anxiety that she saw

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each day pass by with no news of whether he yet lived or was now dead.

At last when a full week had passed the weather cleared and a hard frost made the roads practicable once more. Briscoe was now so far better that he required little care, and so Mrs. West had less to occupy her mind. She began to feel the suspense too great but reminded herself that it was all part of her just reward. That same evening a stray passer-by was able to say that John Leigh still lived.

Early the next morning she was summoned down stairs and found Annie, who had just arrived, waiting in the parlour to see her. For the first moment Mrs. West dreamed wildly that Annie had relented, had come to forgive her and bring her back in reconciliation, and she who had been so proud and hard was eager to receive with gratitude the smallest favour that might be shown her.

But her first glance as she entered the room dispelled that delusion and she gave way to almost a feeling of despair, for she recognized at once the deep and unchanged enmity that spoke in the girl's every movement, in every pose of her body, that thrilled through the level and monotonous tones of her voice as she spoke with no attempt at greeting.

"Mrs. West," she said, "I have come by my father's desire to request you to return at once. He is—distressed that you are not there."

"Oh," cried Mrs. West, her despair washed away as the warm spring rains wipe out the winter's snow. "Oh, how good, how kind. And of you, Annie—" She came near, her tongue voluble with gratitude and affection, and

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stopped short abruptly, checked by the girl's unaltered air of hostility.

Neither of them spoke for a moment and Mrs. West realized again how her conduct must have appeared to this girl to excite in her so lasting an anger. In the pause, busy as her thoughts were, she yet noted with that strange interest in trifles people often show in moments of strong emotion, that Annie held in her hand her father's chain, her fingers resting caressingly on the little locket.

"Please oblige me by not using my name," said Annie coldly; "and please understand I do not come by my own wish. I told my father I considered your presence an insult to the memory of his wife and my mother. Under the circumstances I was unable to push my opposition further."

"But, Annie—do not—" Mrs. West, in spite of her joy at this summons was yet distressed and uneasy. "Oh, you must not think like that," she cried desperately.

"Must not," answered Annie, her indignation suddenly flashing out. She held out the chain and locket. "Why, I would not even leave her portrait to lie in the room where you would be!"

Mrs. West said nothing, but in her mind was a piercing memory of how once this locket, which now Annie thought might be contaminated by her presence, had held her own photograph. Merely to proclaim that fact would crush at once this proud girl, and why should she spare one so hostile to her? Yet now anger had lost its savour and then Annie asked coldly:

"Do you intend to return as my father wishes?"

"Oh, yes," cried Mrs. West, and started off to get ready in sudden panic at the idea of losing time.

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"One moment," said Annie. "Why are you here?"

"Why not?" answered Mrs. West, a little awkwardly.

"I might have suspected something of the sort," said Annie, who, deeply surprised to hear where Mrs. West was, had all the journey from town been imagining deep and evil plans laid against Briscoe and herself. The very least she anticipated had been some attempt to set Briscoe against her by representing her absence as neglect. Her eager inquiries when she first arrived had revealed nothing to alarm her, but the very praise of Mrs. West she heard on all sides served to increase her suspicions. "I am going to see Arthur," she said, watching the other closely for any sign of triumph or dismay. "I shall be ready in half an hour."

At the end of the stipulated time she returned to find Mrs. West ready and waiting for her. In almost complete silence they took their places in the cutter Annie had come in and started away quickly over the smooth snow. The sleigh bells tinkled merrily in the calm frosty air as the horses trotted fast towards town. The two women sat without speaking; but now surprise was mingled with resentment in Annie's mind. For Briscoe had confirmed the story she had been told of Mrs. West's patient and unwearying care for him; and though she was still deeply suspicious she felt that so far, at least, there was some cause even for gratitude. "He owes his life to her care," she had been told several times. But Annie was not one to give up a belief readily or easily. She had been deceived once and now she searched for some deep and malign motive hidden beneath the seeming kindness.

By her side Mrs. West was as deep in thought, and though she was returning to the desire of her heart,

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called again to the care of her husband, she felt little joy and no triumph. For one thing, she was deeply concerned lest Annie might discover the truth about her birth; perhaps she even attached an exaggerated and morbid importance to this point. She felt it as part of her just burden to keep this fact from Annie, because doing so must perpetuate her own inability to take her rightful position or declare her wrongs.

"I am taking from Annie her father, I tried to destroy her lover, at least one might leave her her mother," muttered Mrs. West to herself.

It even occurred to her that she might give up this coming reconciliation and going away leave father and daughter untroubled as they had been before her arrival. But this she knew to be beyond her strength, though all through the drive the suggestion haunted her.

"Mrs. West," said Annie suddenly, as they approached their destination, "I intend to stay for a little at the hotel, though of course I shall not interfere with you in any way. But I wish to be near at hand. I suppose you do not object?"

"Of course not; I shall be very glad," said Mrs. West, and it occurred to her that this would be a good opportunity to declare her renunciation and restore Annie to her charge. She pictured the girl's incredulous surprise turning to delight as she understood. But she felt it beyond her power, and Annie's cold voice cut into her thoughts.

"Do you know why my father was so anxious and why I felt it my duty to yield?" She spoke deliberately and there was a slow sternness in her voice that served as a warning of danger.

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"No, I do not—I did not—" came the hesitating answer, and then with a quick burst of anxiety: "Oh, is he—"

"Yes," answered Annie in the same level tones; "the doctor says he cannot possibly live more than twenty-four hours."

"Twenty-four hours," repeated Mrs. West mechanically, and then she began to laugh softly. "I said I would repay him," she added, still with the same low chuckle.

Annie was neither sufficiently experienced nor sufficiently calm to recognize this laughter for what it was, and her indignation swelled high, became indeed absolute horror.

"Oh," she cried, "why does God make such women?"

"As me?" said Mrs. West. "Why, that I do not know."

"You can *laugh*," said Annie, her indignation not lessened at this reply. "*Laugh*—at such a thing. I do not care what he said. You are not fit. I will not permit it. Why, you must hate him to *laugh*. Oh, I do not care what he said—he did not understand that. You shall not go near him. I will stop you."

"Then I must run," said Mrs. West, and before Annie understood her intention she sprang from the sleigh and was running at speed down the road to the hotel, and the dry snow rose up like dust behind her as her rapid feet displaced it.

In a moment or two she was at the door and passed in. She went up the stair and entered the room softly, but he, now conscious and awake, half raised himself in the bed. She ran to him and he took her in his arms and as he held her he laughed out in triumph.

"It is not true?" she asked between his kisses. "Why do you laugh? Oh, say it is not true."

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"Oh, yes," he answered, "it is true, true that I have paid, true that I am dying. But what does that matter," he said with laughter, "because it was for you and now you have forgiven me."

He held her so tightly in his arms that she could not move or speak, nor had she any wish to. It had been a long and devious journey, but she felt that she was home once more. He held her so strongly, his laughter was so glad, that she could not believe him really dying. Yet the thought of it lay black in her mind. "It cannot be true," she said to herself, and even as she spoke the strength of his excitement left him so that he dropped back upon the bed and lay still. In a paroxysm of anxiety, her heart cold with fear, she leaned above him, using every remedy her knowledge suggested while fast her messenger sped for the doctor. At last he opened his eyes.

"I shall not die," he whispered as she bent to catch his feeble words; "I shall not die, but live. Doc's a fool."

"Oh, will you really? will you, John?" she asked, hanging on his words as though everything depended on his simple wish; "dear John, will you?"

"You—bet," he murmured between short gasps.

"Then will we be happy yet, very happy," she whispered in his ear; "happy! happy! happy!" she breathed in a kind of ecstasy and knew not she whispered to the dead.

THE END

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